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**. THE  
RETURN OF THE PETTICOAT**



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# THE RETURN OF THE PETTICOAT

By  
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# THE RETURN OF THE PETTICOAT

## CHAPTER I

No man sees more of the strange things of life than the physician who is called in to heal sick bodies and sick souls. Many silent tragedies that the world has no eye for run their course within his ken. Often the physician might be tempted to declare that sorrow is at the root of all sickness, and that disease is but the "materialisation" of some more subtle spiritual state. Your man of healing may be faced at any moment with a problem as bizarre and strange as one of Balzac's tales. Men and women steal to him out of the dark, pouring out their hearts to him, perhaps beseeching him to use the knife or his drugs upon their souls. The physician speaks awhile with these sick people; they go out into the world again, and he may see their faces no more. Tired birds of passage resting upon the rigging of some ship; the sailor sees the flutter of their wings; then they are gone, and his imagination alone can wonder—whither?

It was a dingy February evening when Dr. Habershone stood with his back to his consulting-room fire, and studied the face of the patient before him with the grave and observant eyes of a man who has the book of humanity ever open. Dr. Habershone had read many strange tales in that same book, but here was one of the most curious and pathetic studies that Nature had ever offered him.

The woman was dressed in a loosely-cut Norfolk

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jacket, with a shortish skirt of Harris tweed to match. She wore a man's straw hat and a man's collar, and her black hair was no longer than the hair of a very young aesthetician. But it was her face that seemed to hold up the problem "mirror" before Dr. Habershone's eyes. It was one of those faces that might have served either a man or a woman—a smooth, olive-skinned face, with features that would have looked well under a Ramilies wig. Considered as a man's face—and there was a faint dark down upon the upper lip—it might have symbolised the spirit of Arthurian manhood as pictured by one of the most spiritual of the romanticists. Considered in relation to the skirt, the face seemed a little too virile, too purposeful, too determined. It was not difficult to see that the woman had suffered, and that she was one of those who would thrust the thorns of life aside, and push forward beyond the bounds of mere convention.

Habershone had heard her tale. It was an extraordinary one in many respects, touched with tragedy, and he had wondered during the hearing of it why she had come to him. He was a man of many affairs. Sick people—or, rather, the imaginary sick—are often complete egotists, and the busy physician had not the leisure to suffer such patients to harangue him as they pleased. And at first Habershone had attempted to shepherd and curtail the course of her confession. She had understood the attitude almost before he had put it into expression. "In telling you my life," she said, "I am giving you my symptoms. Please be patient with me. I do not think that it is an ordinary case."

No case is ordinary to the individual sufferer. Habershone granted the truth of the assertion, and decided that the woman looked in perfect health.

Perhaps there was some telepathic sympathy between them, for the thing that she was going to ask him to do for her flashed into Habershone's mind before she had uttered it. The suggestion was so extraordinary, so bizarre, that he looked at her criti-

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cally as she sat in the chair before him, noting the contours of her figure—the mere girlish fullness at the bosom, the lack of the feminine outlines at the hips and waist. It was the figure of youth before the mysterious birth of the complexities of sex.

There was a pause at last. She sat and stared at the carpet as though her eyes were tracing the patterns in the rich blues and reds of the East.

"Who sent you to me?"

She looked up at him with instant candour.

"Mr. Cumberledge, of Lincoln's Inn."

"Cumberledge! You have been in England, you say——"

"A month—hardly more. I have left Australia for good. I have no relations in England, not even an acquaintance. Mr. Cumberledge is my only friend."

Her voice was deep and a little husky—a voice that could have passed as a man's, but by no means harsh and ugly. The slight stoop of Habershone's shoulders seemed to suggest a concentrated and earnest interest.

"I have been quite frank with you," she said. "I have shown you my experiences, and what I have suffered from them. There is nothing criminal or insane in the ultimate issue. Perhaps I have suffered more than other women. I am tired of being an anomaly, of what I am."

Habershone's forehead gathered into wrinkles.

"You mean——?"

"Oh, I am just tired of the old life. I hate it from what it taught me, for its disillusionment, its cynicism. One may be tempted at times to shake the old self off like a husk. I want to develop a new personality, to work, to live over again."

The physician straightened himself, his hands clasped behind his back.

"If—I fail to understand——"

She looked at him steadily.

"Have you ever come across people," she said, "who rebel against Nature's classification, and against the domination of sex?"

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Habershone nodded his head slowly.

"I have had cases——"

"Perhaps you can see the psychology of the thing? When one has had the most sacred part of oneself humiliated and spoilt, one longs to throw it aside like a soiled dress, and take to something healthier and fresher. A man's life appeals to me. Perhaps you grasp my meaning?"

Habershone opened his mouth, closed it again, and stood staring at the books in the case against the opposite wall.

"You mean——?"

"I am going to live a man's life. It is only here that Nature might betray me." And she passed her hands over her breasts.

Habershone's eyes gleamed down at her with instant sternness.

"Do you realise what you are saying?"

"Perfectly."

"And you ask me to undertake such a matter for the sake, perhaps, of a passing whim?"

She looked at him without wavering.

"It is not a whim," she said, "or I should have felt the insolence of asking such a thing. Please take me seriously. I want my liberty—the kind of liberty that a man can claim."

She spoke with an intensity that brought light and colour to her eyes and face. Habershone smoothed the corner of a grey moustache.

"Surely you can have liberty in these days without all this?"

"Can I?". And her mouth hardened.

"Some of your sex are not unassertive."

"You are a man of the world," she answered.

"You must know the different values of things. Has any woman the same freedom, the same air-space, the same possibilities as a man?"

Habershone reflected a moment.

"She cannot have," he answered.

"Why?"

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"Because she is a woman, because her physiology, and the psychology that springs from it, prevent her from being other than she is."

"You partly prove my point for me."

"Indeed!"

"The life that I wish to lead is the man's life, not the woman's. At least, in externals, I mean to have a man's freedom."

They were both silent a moment, each studying the projection of this fantasy upon the screen of the future. Habershone looked grave. His physician's honour was not merely a piece of professional prudence.

"I may as well tell you frankly," he said, "that the thing you suggest is quite impossible. No surgeon of repute would undertake it. It has no proper justification."

She looked at him as a brave woman looks at the man who can tell her the truth.

"Could I succeed without that?"

"You mean——"

"Without the more heroic treatment? Please judge me critically. I will only ask for an opinion."

Habershone hesitated a moment, as though debating the moral side of the problem. The grey eyes under the grizzled brows studied her, as though challenging her future. Was he justified in even considering the possibility of such a masquerade? Yet the face before him did not look persuadable against its plan. It was the face of a courageous woman and a clever woman serenely in earnest.

"You are setting me a riddle," he said.

"No; I accept my own responsibility. Each individual is its own riddle. I only ask you for an opinion upon facts."

Habershone nodded.

"Please stand up," he said.

She obeyed him, standing naturally and easily, without a flicker of affectation or cheap daring. Habershone eyed her critically, and then passed his



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hands over her figure, noting its slimness and its lack of pronounced feminine contours.

"Take my opinion for what it is worth," he said. "A light bandage, perhaps, here and here. Even without it no one would suspect."

"Thank you," she said.

"There will be a thousand difficulties. Even such a thing as a tailor has to be considered."

"Oh, I have thought of all such details. I shall not be so vain a man that I shall refuse to wear ready-made clothes."

She was turning to go when Habershone put in a last warning.

"Let me ask you, most gravely, to think this over. In the first place——"

"It is illegal. I know that. I have no intention of blundering."

"No one is infallible. Chances arise——"

"Of course. Believe me, I am very grateful." And she left the fee on the corner of a side-table. "May I come and see you again?"

"By all means. The matter is quite safe with me."

"Though it is illegal?"

"May I retort by asking you what Mr. Cumberledge said on the subject?"

She stood by the door, looking at the long window that showed nothing more lovely than a blank brick wall the colour of brown mud.

"Yes; I will tell you. There are two kinds of law—the common law of the policeman's fist, and the experimental law of the individual mind. The first should not be able to grasp and strangle an inspiration. Perhaps you understand?"

"Strange law for a lawyer!"

"Mr. Cumberledge is something more than that: he is a friend. Besides, the affair could always be claimed as an experiment. I might be bracketed with those people who go to Westminster and scuffle with the law of the policeman's fist. I do not suppose that I should be punished much more heavily."

## CHAPTER II

A MONTH or so later Dr. Habershone drove back from his morning lecture on medicine to the students of the hospital of which he was senior physician. As the brougham stopped outside the house in Wimpole Street, a young man turned from the physician's door and met Habershone as he crossed the pavement.

"Good morning."

"Good morning——"

Habershone's eyes swept the face before him with the slightly questioning look of a busy man who has many faces to remember. There was nothing very distinctive about this pale young man in the loosely cut serge suit, though the physician detected something like amused curiosity in the stranger's eyes.

"You have an appointment with me?"

Habershone had brought out his latch-key, and turned to the great olive-green door with its burnished brass.

"I am afraid I have no appointment. But I can wait. I see that you do not remember me."

Habershone had the key in the latch. He swung the door open, and then turned and looked steadily into his visitor's face. The straight mouth curved into a smile under the grey moustache.

"Of course," he said; "it is the experimentalist of a month ago."

The physician's eyes swept up and down in a swift survey, and the young man coloured very slightly.

"I said that I should come and see you again. I was grateful for your sympathy, and for the time you gave to the tale of a rebel."

Habershone stood aside.

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"Come in. I am afraid I shall have to ask you to wait for half an hour. I have one or two people to see by appointment."

"Oh, I can wait."

"Let me see, Mr——?"

They smiled into each other's eyes.

"Mr. Richard Dathan."

"Ah, to be sure. That is the name, is it?"

"Yes."

The physician's dining-room, where his patients waited, was one of those solemn and sumptuously simple rooms that seem full of the shadows of grave issues. The Turkey carpet deadened the sound of feet. The oak furniture was dark and mellow, with a polish of cultured and philosophical reserve. There were a few good pictures on the walls, one of them, on the wall opposite the windows, the blaze of a wet sunset seen beyond the huge tangle of a beech wood in winter. Direct sunlight never crept farther into the room than the stained boards under the two windows. The atmosphere was cool, restful, a little sad, yet without the gloom of a Spanish picture. It seemed to be a room where many people had waited and sighed. A pathetic and patient suspense hung in the air, and one could have fancied that a gentle thrill of suffering made the perfume of the Scilly flowers on the table and the colours of the pictures on the walls more intense and more full of human significance.

The young man in the serge suit was left alone there, with a mass of periodicals upon the table, and the quiet life of the quiet street without. He stood for a while turning the pages of a *Studio*, passing a little perfunctorily over the conceptions of things beautiful. Presently he strolled to and fro, loitered at the window, and then turned and stood staring at the beech wood, black and in arms against the sunset. The vermilions and golds thereof seemed to sweep the material wall aside, and to carry the thoughts into strange and mysterious distances. It was the

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eternal lure in the sky, the sadness of far horizons beckoning the soul towards some more wonderful vale of desire.

The physician's man-servant introduced imperturbable reality into the spiritual room.

"Will you come this way, sir?"

And from the splendour of the sunset the dreamer's eyes sank to the mud-coloured brick wall seen through the window of Habershone's consulting-room. Whereas the ante-chamber held the pathos of wonder and suspense, the inner room met the mind with the finality of a fact.

"So you have started the experiment?"

Habershone turned his desk chair and looked at his visitor, whose profile was lit by the cold light from the window.

"Yes; my ship has put to sea."

"For a new continent?"

"And a new atmosphere."

"And shall you burn your ship when you have landed?"

"No; I shall keep the faint chance open for a return."

Habershone crossed one knee over the other and stared at the fire.

"I suppose you have foreseen possible complications?"

"Such as——?"

"Illness."

"Oh, I am quite healthy."

"Healthy is only a relative condition, like a stick balanced on a finger. There are such things as accidents."

"I know. Should anything of the kind occur——"

"Well?"

"Might I count on your sympathy?"

Habershone looked at the calm face and frowned slightly as he reflected.

"The physician is not the only person to be considered."

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"I have a friend in Mr. Cumberledge. He, too, spoke of such a possibility."

"I see. And supposing that the experiment should not please you, and that you should desire the return of the petticoat?"

She lifted her chin and looked with a gleam of humour at the physician.

"I am keeping a double personality open."

"Oh!"

"I have left a sister in Australia—a twin sister."

"To be exploited, if necessary."

"Exactly. The resemblance between us is quite remarkable."

"Rather an obsolete fiction, is it not?"

"It would serve."

"Oh, possibly. May I be permitted to know something of the life?"

She put her two hands about one knee.

"If it interests you. I have a love of the country, of labouring, and contriving, and interfering with Nature. You see, a man is so unfettered; he need not be tyrannised over by the social side of things. I have a sort of love for Thoreau, for the open air, and for using my own hands. I want to get close to the soil of life. I have already bought my home."

Habershon nodded.

"May I know where?"

"In one of the southern counties, ten miles from the sea. An old farm-house, with about seventy acres of land, and much of it wood."

"Are you going to farm?"

"As the whim takes me. Money has not to be considered."

"You will live alone?"

"Quite alone, save for a housekeeper and a girl."

"And supposing it bores you?"

"Oh, well, I can escape. I have no intention of being bored."

She talked to Habershon some while longer

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before realising for his sake that her leisure was not his.

"Then I may come to you—if ever I see any complication threatening—in case of illness?"

"I am willing to accept the physician's part of the responsibility."

"Thank you, eternally. And now——"

She held out her hand.

"It will be Mr. Dathan everywhere. I enter the male sex as he and him. I am still tempted to muddle the he and the she. What a paradox! Do I look sufficiently unfeminine?"

Habershone smiled.

"To be discourteous, I have seen many more feminine-looking men."

"I believe I could look the woman again, if necessary."

"It is so much a matter of dress."

"Yes; I have seen schoolboys make very pretty girls. Good-bye. I shall always be grateful."

"Good-bye, Mr. Dathan."

And Habershone's man-servant ushered the mystery into the outer world of Wimpole Street.

## CHAPTER III

ROSE JESSEL and Tom Swaine walked the platform at Ravenshoe Station, and watched the signals for the four o'clock train that was to take the girl to Ravensmouth and the sea.

Tom Swaine's face had that tired fixity of look that often settles on a face that has struggled long and strenuously to be cheerful. He walked with his hands in his pockets, carrying his head high, like a man looking at the horizon, his forehead slightly puckered above a pair of long-sighted and uncompromising eyes.

"She's left Tunston, Tom; the signal's down."

Tom Swaine swung round on one heel, stared up the platform, and appeared lost in meditation for fully half a minute.

"You'll be having a gay time down at Ravensmouth, Rose," he said suddenly, swinging round again and looking in her eyes.

The girl's face caught none of the shadow of uneasiness born of the man's spirit of instinctive unrest. She was just a piece of sensuous beauty, such beauty as may be seen in any popular café where comeliness is essential. Rossetti might have taken her as a model, to be dowered with some sumptuous blaze of colour and glorified with a mysterious Italian title. But she had a vivacity, a tinge of wicked aliveness, that Rossetti's women could not boast. The self-pleased swing of her plump figure, the glint in the sidelong eyes, the very way she set her feet, made the men look back at her when they passed her in the street.

"I don't look like having a dull time, Tom, do I?"

He assented a little grudgingly, repelled, as he

was often repelled, by the girl's cheap self-confidence and vanity. Rose was smiling at a porter on the opposite platform, smoothing her hair, and giving her hat a still more alluring tilt.

"Sorry I'm going, Tom?"

"Sorry?"

He looked at her as a man who is very much in earnest looks at some picture that appeals to his senses, and yet does not satisfy his soul. Her volatility baffled him. It was never possible to keep her to one mood.

"Ravenshoe won't be the same place, Rose——"

"Won't it?" And she beamed at him as though he were a pleasant fellow enough so long as he could flatter.

"No, of course not. I've been thinking——"

To Rose Jessel thought recalled that deplorably serious side of life where people busy themselves with the moral responsibilities of others. Tom Swaine's serious moods usually made her yawn. It was the instinct of thoroughness in the man that clashed with her lighter sensuous nature.

"I've been thinking——" he repeated.

She made a grimace and laughed.

"Put it off till next month, Tom, as dad puts off his blessed bills. Here comes the puff-puff."

Her vulgar trifling repulsed him, as a child's prattle disarms the parent whose conscience urges the delivery of a lecture. Tom Swaine stood watching the train swing over the points towards the station, conscious the while of a pert chin-tilted profile that faced life as though it were nothing more serious than a country fair.

Tom Swaine opened a carriage door, only to swing it to again when he noticed the blue label "Smoking" on the window.

Rose Jessel interposed.

"I don't mind smoke," she said, setting a neat new shoe upon the footboard.

The man produced a glimmer of a smile.



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"It keeps out the old ladies and the kids. I don't mind company—when it smokes decent tobacco."

Tom Swaine let down the window and closed the door. The carriage was empty, save for Miss Rose Jessel, who would not have resented the presence of nine uncritical males.

Tom leant against the door and appeared to be examining the window-strap with peculiar interest.

"Rose."

"Well?"

He was frowning hard, yet striving to assume an expression of affectionate and brotherly candour.

"I don't know whether I ought to say it."

"Say what?"

"About your place down at Ravensmouth."

She looked at him unashamedly and with a slight hardening of the eyes.

"What, at the Golden Fleece?"

"Yes."

"Dear me! I suppose there are honest women behind a bar, aren't there?"

Tom Swaine somewhat ungraciously supposed there were. He was still studying the window-strap.

"It isn't the sort of thing——" he added doggedly.

"For a pretty girl like me, Tom? I've heard that before. Why on earth don't we start?" And she leant out of the carriage window, thereby compelling Tom modestly to stand back.

"You're too good, Rose, for that sort of thing."

"Oh, teacher, I'll really be good, teacher, and I'll learn three hymns and a collect for next Sunday!" and she tittered in his solemn face. "They must be putting a horse-box on, Tom. Look! there's Maggie Martin and her young man from Bamberry. Don't they look a pair of frights? Maggie would scare the custom away from any 'house.' She's a Young Women's Christian all over—down to her boots. It's a pretty face that brings the boys in, Tom, you know," and she gave him a wicked ogle.

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"Oh, Lord! that fool Wingate hasn't put my tin box in yet. Run along, Tom; we shall be off in a jiffy."

Tom Swaine went striding along the platform, shoulders squared, hands swinging, like a linesman on the march. The guard's whistle blew as he reprimanded "that fool Wingate," a fat, bumpy-faced little man with a twinkling eye, whose red tie had a habit of climbing up above the collar of his corduroy jacket.

The train was on the move before Tom regained Rose Jessel's window. She held out a tolerant hand to him, ignoring the troubled, questioning look that still met her in his eyes.

"Good-bye, Rose."

It was as though he had much to say and that he could say nothing in that brief moment.

"Give us a smile, Tommy. You'll be running in some day."

"Soon."

"Don't forget it."

He stood on the platform, watching the train glide out, oblivious to the faces that looked at him as coach after coach rolled by. Before the engine had reached the signal-box Rose Jessel's blue hat had vanished from sight. She was standing in the middle of the carriage, leaning her knees against the seat, and surveying herself in the mirror that was framed between photographs of popular South Coast pleasure resorts.

Tom Swaine turned with a melancholy whistle, to find himself shouldering one of the station lamp-posts. The post was uncompromising in its rigid hauteur, and Tom Swaine's dignity suffered by the contrast.

He glared round him sheepishly, like a man who imagines the whole world tittering, and stared straight into the face of a gentleman in a serge suit who was waiting beside a couple of packing-cases that had been loaded on a barrow. The stranger was smiling

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over the episode. Tom Swaine created a grievance from that smile.

At the booking-office door he discovered an acquaintance in the person of the booking-clerk, whose duties occasionally included the collection of tickets. The clerk had inquiries to make concerning the coming season of the local cricket club, and as Tom Swaine loitered to explain, the gentleman of the smile delivered up a ticket and passed out.

A strange face usually arrests attention in a country town.

"Who's that fellow, Fred?"

"What, the chap that has just gone out?"

"Yes."

"Funny you asking that! He's the fellow who's bought the Red Ghyll from Mrs. Hermon."

A shadow of many memories seemed to sweep across Tom Swaine's face. The Red Ghyll Farm had been his father's till the old man had failed two years ago and died in a Ravenshoe cottage.

"What's his name?"

"Funny sort of name. Dathan—Mr. Richard Dathan. I've seen it on some of the goods that have been sent down from town."

Tom Swaine walked up the station hill with Mr. Richard Dathan's back as a target for his eyes. The man had a species of melancholy and resentful interest for Tom Swaine in that he had become the possessor of that old farm that Tom as a lad had loved as his very own. The Swaines were of the county stock, yeomen of yeomen, who were going the way of the things that pass. And in the country the instinct of home is as a part of the earth's lore, one with the scent of the wood fire in the kitchen, the sweet perfume of the cool, dark dairy, and the odour of new-mown hay. To Tom Swaine this tall, well-shaped, prosperous figure seemed that of an interloper who had ousted the people of the soil. What did the fellow in his London clothes want with an old farm-house whose black beams had criss-crossed

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over many fustian generations? Tom Swaine concluded that Mr. Richard Dathan was but another of those tweed-suited, moneyed gentlemen of the age who were displacing hobnails with shooting boots and cart-horses with motor-cars.

Up towards Ravenshoe town Tom Swaine followed Mr. Richard Dathan. Up towards the old castle, set like a great grey casket, many towered, upon its hill. Up towards the strange old streets, with their strange old houses, their high-walled gardens shaded by the domes of many stately trees. Up towards the ghylls and hangers of the old park lands, where the deer came down to drink at the lakes by twilight, and where the beech-trees cast purple shadows across the emerald grass. Up towards the yews and cedars brooding about the church, whose chantries spoke of the great ones who had slept since the kings of England made war in the fields of France.

## CHAPTER IV

TOM SWAINE was dibbling in potatoes behind the thorn hedge closing his garden from the road when the click of the white gate brought his chin round to the level of a grey-shirted shoulder.

A tall, flat-chested woman stood holding the gate open with one hand, and looking in through the doorway of the cottage with the air of a village Victoria who expected the lustre emanating from her presence to penetrate even into the little wash-house at the back of the poor man's dwelling.

"Mrs. Swaine!"

The voice was very complacent and very throaty—a voice that had a liturgical affectation, such as one may hear in many a suburban church. Yet even its Decalogue tone failed to produce Mrs. Swaine in the flesh. Tom, kneeling, and leaning on his dibler, accepted the inevitable and scrambled up. It was Mrs. Portia Hermon, of "The Mount," who waited at the gate, a lady of power in the parish of Ravenshoe by reason of the fact that her late husband had made much money in the manufacture of biscuit tins.

"Ah, Swaine, I want to speak to you a moment."

Mrs. Hermon's face was a colourless, formless plane, broken only by a sharp little putty-like nose bridging a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. Her hay-coloured hair, innocent of all curl or lustre, and eked out cunningly with made-up combings, was drawn back stiffly from her forehead, a forehead that resembled a bent knee. And yet, despite her convincing ugliness, or perhaps because of it, she was considered to be a woman of presence by such people as did not resent her complacency.

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Tom looked discreetly grave and lifted his cap.

"I hear you have not had great success, Swaine, with your market garden and your poultry."

Tom looked still more grave. A man is never pleased by suggestions of failure.

"I have had a great deal of bad luck——"

Mrs. Hermon's spectacles glimmered as though she were prompted to harangue this young man on ascribing losses to anything so irreligious as luck.

"Our seasons are very uncertain, Swaine, and we have no very good markets near. I have always heard you praised as a steady fellow."

Tom stared into space.

"I have just been consulted by a friend who needs a steady young man, Swaine, and I thought that I would give you the first chance."

Mrs. Hermon was not a woman who disguised her patronage. She conferred favours with a serene self-satisfaction that was beautifully blind to that indecent spirit of independence that dares to dwell even in a common cottage. On more than one occasion Mrs. Hermon had found herself snubbed, and the only conclusion that she had drawn from such rudeness was that the ingrates could be nothing but Radical Dis-senters.

Tom Swaine stood to attention with a straight back and an unkindling eye.

"It is very good of you, Mrs. Hermon——"

"Don't mention it, Swaine." And she looked at him as though he were a most deserving creature. "No doubt you have heard of Mr. Dathan, who has taken Red Ghyll Farm?"

Tom's interest quickened instantly.

"Mr. Dathan needs a reliable young fellow about the place, and he asked me to recommend him someone steady, sober, and trustworthy."

Mrs. Portia Hermon's very naming of these virtues filled Tom Swaine with a spontaneous and contradictory impulse towards vice.

"Mr. Dathan, you said?"

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"I recommended you, Swaine. It is an opportunity such as few young men obtain in these highly competitive days."

Tom stood looking beyond Mrs. Portia Hermon's pilaster-like figure to where a grey turret touched the broad azure above a sheaf of firs. It is in some men's nature to resent the very breath of patronage. Yet there are few who are strong enough to resist the rack of necessity or to pretend to equality with the autocrat who holds the purse.

Mrs. Hermon waited for the expected gush of gratitude. Tom's momentary silence merely suggested to her that he was a modest fellow at a loss to express his thanks.

"It will be a good place," she said encouragingly. "A wage-earner's position is often one to be envied."

"I'll think it over."

Mrs. Hermon's eyebrows arched perceptibly above the gold rims of her glasses.

"Certainly, Swaine; do nothing in a hurry. But I should recommend you to remember that such opportunities do not occur every day of the year."

"Of course not." And he attempted to feel grateful to her for her meddlesome condescension. "You see, it is like this, Mrs. Hermon, we've seen better days, and——"

He hesitated, the fingers of his right hand fumbling with the buttons of his shirt.

"Well, Swaine?"

The lady's voice began to climb towards hauteur. Tom looked uneasy. Mrs. Hermon was not a woman whom a poor man could confide in with facility.

"I don't somehow like working at the old place where father was the master. He always said he'd be something there or nothing, and it's the same with me, I suppose—a matter of pride."

Mrs. Hermon stared. Any refinement of sentiment in people who kept pigs within ten yards of their back door struck her as superfluous. Personally, she coupled any such false piece of pride with the

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genteel affectation of a parlour-maid who received lessons on the piano.

"When we have our livings to earn, Swaine, we cannot afford to indulge in whims."

"Of course not, Mrs. Hermon."

That there was irony in the answer Mrs. Hermon did not suspect. She had never earned a penny in her life, nor did she realise that pride is often a luxury that can be paraded with ostentation only by the few.

"Then I presume, Swaine, that you will take the place? I should advise you to consider the matter seriously."

Tom opened the gate for her, relieved by the veering of her spectacles towards the road.

"Perhaps I had better go and see Mr. Dathan," he said quietly.

"By all means, Swaine. Your mother is quite well, I trust?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"I am glad to hear it. Good-day." And she turned up the road, thoroughly convinced that she had done her most august and gracious duty.

Tom Swaine stood looking after her, with his hand on the garden gate.

"I suppose these people mean things kindly," he reflected. "Confound the woman! I wonder how she would like to be talked to like a lame dog?"

Tom went back to the dibbling of his potatoes, and frowned hard at the brown, fresh-turned soil as he worked. He realised vividly enough that the lady of "The Mount" had spoken the truth with regard to the inevitableness of necessity. Tom Swaine was no idler, but even the steady drudgery of day on day had found him less forward in the world's favour. Nature has a knack of mocking the most strenuous of men, of baffling his efforts with a hundred unforeseen petty disasters, of breaking the heart in him out of sheer and malicious spite. Tom had been out of luck month in, month out. He had lost two cows



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from tuberculosis; a cold, biting spring had played havoc with his young chickens; a greengrocer in Ravenhoe, to whom he had sold much of his garden stock, had shut up shop and left Tom a creditor to the tune of many pounds; his mother had fallen ill in the winter with asthma and bronchitis, and much of the spare cash had gone in paying the doctor's bill. A blight had seemed on him, and on everything that he touched. Work as he would, Fate had the laugh of him over every venture.

What was the use of it all—this struggle for independence, this combating with the perversities of Nature as the tenant of a small holding that never seemed to pay? Tom had often asked himself the question in the long winter evenings, or when he put his tools away at twilight, tired and discouraged, with the eternal shillings ringing loss and profit in his brain. Often upon the workers on the land must come this feeling of impotence and weariness, this perpetual struggling against chances that mock the patience, year in, year out. The men of Chaldea had felt the blight of old, and had ascribed it to demons whose joy was to baffle and to wreck. Men near to Nature must ever feel the grim relentless working of her forces, that crush without pity, and yet by law. The boon of one day may be the curse of the next. Rain may be prayed for and prayed against almost in one breath.

Tom Swaine thought of all this again as he knelt on the brown earth, making holes with his dibler, and dropping the tubers in one by one. What, after all, was independence worth to him? A mere name, a fictitious liberty, a constant scraping to make ends meet, an eternal plotting to preserve his self-respect. He thought, too, of Rose Jessel as he worked on alone, with the birds singing in the woods below and the scent of primroses faint upon the air. For Tom was not fool enough to be blind to the girl's nature. She was not the woman to be happy where pennies had to be hoarded and petty luxuries

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eschewed. Rose had always favoured him in her light and irresponsible way. The ultimate winning of her had always formed a species of altar-piece above the patient purpose of the man's life.

The church and the castle clocks were chiming the hour together when Tom Swaine put his tools away and went in to tea. His mother, a diffident little woman with a tired face and white hair, was bustling with the tea things in the brick-paved kitchen. She invariably wore an old black silk dress in the afternoon, a relic of more prosperous days, when John Swaine, her husband, had employed a carter, three labourers, and a boy. Tom could remember that same black dress for fifteen years. It seemed as much a part of his mother to him as her tired face and her hands distorted at the joints by many rheumatic winters.

He was washing his hands in a tin basin at the sink, while his mother filled the brown teapot from the kettle.

"Tea ready, mother?"

He sluiced cold water over his head and face, for it was part of Tom's manhood to be fresh and clean.

"Yes, lad." And she began to cut the loaf, watching him the while, as though she knew that he had much upon his mind.

Tom put his coat on and drew a chair forward with his foot.

"Mrs. Hermon's been here," he said, reaching for a cushion from the little couch, and leaning over the table to put it in his mother's chair.

"Thanks, dear." And her short-sighted blue eyes brightened. "I heard her voice as I was dressing."

Tom helped himself to butter.

"She says there's a job for me up at the Red Ghyll," he said slowly.

His mother watched him and waited with the air of a woman whose lot in life had been to wait.

"This new gentleman is taking up chicken farming for fun, I've heard. Pity these comfortable people

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don't think a bit. It is bread and butter, not play, to most of us, and the playing cuts in on our work. Well, he wants a man—a fellow to do the work for him, I suppose, for so many shillings a week; and I suppose there's something on the credit side in that."

Mrs. Swaine looked at him and stirred her tea.

"Well, Tom?" she asked gently.

"Mrs. Hermon recommended me—steady, sober, all that." And he laughed with a tinge of cynicism. "It's easy to patronise a chap, and to talk about making the best of one's opportunities, when one's never had to bother how to come by one's bread and butter."

His mother sighed.

"What do you think about it?" she asked.

"Well, it means money, and that's what seems to rub us most in this life."

"Yes, dear." And she stirred her tea.

"I shall go up and see this Mr. Dathan."

Mrs. Swaine nodded.

"We've had no luck here, and beggars aren't choosers."

His mother's eyes were full of memories for the moment. She was thinking of that cool, dim bedroom under the eaves, and of the night, so long ago, when she had borne her son; and a mother lives very largely in the future of her child. It is rarely with resignation that she sees him under lowlier fortunes than his father.

"It will seem strange, Tom," she said very softly.

He looked at her with his keen, clear eyes.

"Strange, mother?"

"To think of you working there, Tom, where the men called your father 'sir.'"

She sat rubbing the hem of the white tablecloth between her fingers. Tom understood her, since her prejudices were his own.

"It may be the first step," he said with a show of cheerfulness.

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"Yes."

"And the work's honest. I can still turn over something on the land here. We shan't be so pinched, you know; and a man can always get up earlier in the morning."

"You mustn't tire yourself, lad," she said gently.

"Tired! There's not much tiredness about me."

## CHAPTER V

TOM went down to the Red Ghyll Farm that evening when the meadows were vivid under a cloudless sky. The larch thickets were beginning to gleam with green, and beyond the sweep of the upland fields rose great fir woods, black as some forest world of romance.

A grass road running between tall spruces led to the Red Ghyll Farm. It was an old red house, tiled and beamed, with white window frames and massive stunted chimneys. A holly hedge shut off the garden from the fields—a garden where daffodils were swinging their golden heads over rich, rank grass. Westwards of the house the gnarled trees of the orchard were stealing into bloom, and farther still, like a purple cloud, rose the fir woods, that moaned like the sea when a strong wind blew.

To Tom Swaine the very intimacy of the place had a taunting note as he opened the white gate and passed down the winding path. Nothing in the garden had been touched as yet, and for that Tom felt vaguely and illogically grateful. The picturesque dilapidated buildings of the farm seemed silent and empty. The grass on the lawn had not been mown, and the creepers covering the house were hanging thick about the windows.

A placid little woman in a black stuff dress opened the door to Tom, and stood looking up at him with questioning, short-sighted eyes.

"Mr. Dathan in?"

"You want to see him?"

"Mrs. Hermon told me to call"; and Tom explained his business in a few curt words.

The placid little woman smiled at him approvingly.

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"The master's in the orchard. Step in here. I'll go down and tell him."

Tom stepped in, pulling off his cap and wiping his shoes conscientiously on the mat. The black stuff dress disappeared behind a curtain covering the passage to the kitchen, leaving Tom standing on the fringe of a Turkey carpet whose colours were brilliant from the bazaars of the East.

Tom's eyes had a dozen new impressions to receive, for one wall of the hall had been swept away, throwing it into the long, oak-beamed room that had been the parlour as Tom remembered it. The walls had been papered a rich red, the woodwork painted white, saving the black beams that cut the ceiling into a dozen squares. Pieces of tapestry, plates of blue Nankin, pewter dishes, antique brass plaques covered the walls. The furniture was as choice as its quaint setting: a great black press with decorated steel hinges and key-plates, a carved dower chest, a gate-legged table, several Chippendale chairs seated in red velvet. A spinning-wheel stood in one corner, a spinet near the window. Dutch tiles had been fitted into the open fireplace, where the fire burnt on a grid carried by great brass dogs.

Tom Swaine studied all these innovations with a spirit that was compelled towards appreciativeness against its will. He supposed that the old place was not good enough for Mr. Dathan without all this pulling down of walls, this painting and papering. The man must have money enough, unless appearances were fallacious.

He was staring at a piece of tapestry on the wall, whose faded blues and buffs composed some classicism not wholly beyond Tom's ken, when the sharp rattle of rings along a curtain-rod reminded him that he was there as applicant for the post of odd man at the Red Ghyll.

Tom faced round and found himself staring at Mr. Richard Dathan.

"Good evening, sir."

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"Mr. Swaine, is it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was expecting you."

"I only heard to-day——"

"Won't you sit down?"

Tom sat down a little stiffly on the edge of one of the red-covered chairs. Mr. Richard Dathan seated himself on another opposite to Tom, and for a moment they stared at each other in silence. The experience might have been new to both of them by the amount of constraint that each displayed. Tom was an independent man; he had never assimilated any of the suave yet perky politeness of the perfect servant.

"Mrs. Hermon told you that I wanted some help here?"

Tom, dangling his cap between his knees, looked straight at Mr. Dathan and answered that she had.

"I am going to let some of the land. The old place itself is so perfect that it only wants touching here and there. I like something of a wilderness round me. I suppose you understand all about country things?"

The question was comprehensively vague. Tom smiled. The other smiled in return, and a ripple of humour passed instinctively between the two. The sun seemed to come out and thaw the world, and the interview lost its discomfiting perfunctoriness.

"The country life is in the blood," said Tom. "I lived in this house for twenty-five years."

"So Mrs. Hermon told me. You must have been sorry to leave the place."

"Sorry!" and he remembered himself suddenly. "Well, I imagine I was."

They looked at each other curiously, as though each had become abruptly conscious of contact with a personality that attracted and surprised. Tom had come to consider the pay and prejudices of a possible overlord. He had entered the place with his ears closed against such an unmasterly thing as sentiment.

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A voice will set a string in the heart vibrating, nor do words alone fill up the full impression. They were both of them surprised by the discovery of the other—a master with money who was not hortatory, a man of the soil with a peculiar refinement of both voice and face.

"I don't know whether you will be able to help me, Swaine. Shall we go outside and look round?"

They rose and went out. Tom could hardly tell why, but he felt curiously at his ease. Passing out from the porch he caught a glimpse of the other's profile: a straight, low forehead under jet-black hair, a generous mouth, and a firm chin. It was a face that attracted him, though he did not analyse the impression. Something about the man had dispelled Tom's prejudices. He no longer felt himself treading in the shoes of a jealous pride.

They turned into the garden, where the grass stood sadly in need of scything. Here and there in the rough shrubbery that broke the south-west wind the shrubs were struggling to smother one another. One great laurel had its arms about a juniper, and was strangling it in the battle for air and light. On the house a Gloire hung all awry for lack of nails and slips of leather.

"It only wants a touch here and there, Swaine. The man who planned it all knew what he was doing. Look at those grand old firs. You must know more about the history of these trees than I do."

"My grandfather planted them," said Tom.

"Did he? How long ago?"

"Sixty years, I believe. It may be that I know every tree in the place."

Richard Dathan passed on towards the orchard. Tom followed him. The thread of a common passion had suddenly unwoven itself in the sunlight, the passion for trees and woodlands, and the green life of a green land.

"You must have been fond of the place."



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"I was born here," said Tom; "so were most of us for nearly three hundred years."

The Australian was silent awhile. Perhaps he was looking through the centuries of his own unknown forbears. There was a pathetic yet whimsical note in the new impression. The lives of the dead seemed suddenly mingled with the life of that garden and that dim house. It was like the stain on the floor, marking a tragedy. They passed through the great orchard, with its gnarled trees, its brown mole-heaps, and the daffodils hanging here and there over the green tussocks. Richard Dathan began to talk to Tom as to a man who did not look on the place as on so much soil. There were many changes to be considered, it was true, but the Australian touched on them with something like tenderness—a tenderness that remembered the other's memories. The late tenant had held the place hardly two years, and had never used a spade or a hammer where he could shirk the necessity. A garden may take years in the making, but it will run to riot in as many months.

They went down towards the woods, talking of fruit trees, of the best milking cows, of roses, flowering shrubs, chickens, and what not. They might have been friends with the same passion for the same hobby. Tom forgot the more material things as they wandered under the April sky and heard the blackbirds piping in the thickets.

"There are some seventy acres, and some of it wood."

"There were nearly two hundred when we had it," said Tom; "but they split the land up—to suit the times."

"I suppose I can let off these outer fields."

"Yes."

"I don't want a lot of men about the place, nor shall I mind if half of it runs wild. We can always get extra hands in when necessary."

They were drawing from the glamour of the spring evening to more stolid necessities. The in-

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evitable goblin of gold leapt in between them. He had been lurking for a little while in the background of either mind.

"Shall you want me all day, sir?"

"It seems so, Swaine. Look at those trees with the sun on them. Now—about terms."

They were both uneasy again and self-conscious.

"What do you say to thirty shillings a week—to begin with?"

Tom looked surprised. He had figured it out nearer twenty.

"We don't as a rule run to much more than twenty-five down here in Ravenshoe," he said.

"Oh, but skilled labour——"

"There are men just as good as I am. Of course, it depends on a man's responsibilities."

"You are not much of a hand at a bargain, Swaine!"

"Well, sir, I thought you might not know."

They both laughed.

"Supposing we fix it at thirty shillings, Swaine. I am not good at a bargain myself. You will have plenty to do here. I am going to work, too, and we can share our enthusiasm together."

"I can't quarrel," said Tom, still smiling and thinking of his mother. "I'll see that I earn it."

"That is good enough for me."

And this was the way Richard Dathan engaged a servant, and doubtless Mrs. Portia Hermon would have been greatly astonished had she heard master and man dealing in such methods of exchange.

## CHAPTER VI

MR. ANTHONY JESSEL, cobbler and bootmaker, trudged along the Greenway at Ravensmouth with a large brown-paper parcel under his arm. Mr. Jessel had run in from Ravenshoe by train, to buy leather at the wholesale shop he patronised in the town by the sea, and to pay a flying visit to his daughter at the "Golden Fleece." Mr. Jessel was a shabby, middle-sized man of sixty, with a thin, straight mouth, and a sharply pointed white beard that curved forward like the under-hook of the new moon. He had alert, narrow eyes, and rather a high colour—a colour that contrasted with the whiteness of his beard.

Mr. Jessel stopped before a very prosperous and ornate-looking public-house in the Greenway, where a very gorgeously gilded fleece dangled from an ornamental bracket. The façade of the place was sumptuous with decorated glass, green and yellow tiles, and cheap stone carving. The vestibule was paved with mosaic representing a very fat Silenus lying under a vine with a wine cup in his fist. Mr. Jessel loitered a moment to admire the old gentleman who looked so pink, chubby, and inspiring, with nothing of temperance reform in his features, and nothing of asceticism in his flesh.

The cobbler pushed open one of the elaborate swing-doors and entered this shrine of Bacchus, glorious as it was with a dazzling glitter of glass in every shade and shape. The very "beer-pulls" were beautiful to behold. As for the great china spirit-kegs with their gold, their "Royal Blue" and "Rose du Barry," they were sufficient in themselves to consecrate the place as a palace of art.

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"Well, my dear, how's business?"

Mr. Jessel walked up to the bar with a grin, deposited his parcel on the floor, and sat himself down on one of the bent-cane stools. Rose, in a black silk blouse and white lace fichu, and with a red bow in her hair, received Mr. Jessel with a welcome that lacked warmth.

Possibly it was not a thirsty hour of the day, for the only patrons of the place were three full-blooded young men in tweed suits, big check caps and flannel collars fastened with gold pins. They were lolling round a table close to the bar, spreading their legs and smoking twopenny cigars.

"Pint of bitter, Rose, please."

The young lady in the silk blouse looked by no means pleased. Mr. Jessel was a shabby old gentleman with a partiality for felt hats that had gone green and coats that were greasy at the collar. Moreover, a very unmistakable odour ascended from the parcel that the cobbler had ostentatiously deposited at his feet.

Nat Jessel had a hide thicker than his own leather, and an aplomb that verged on an irritating obtuseness. The young men at the table were studying him with that staring impertinence that young men of a certain type adopt towards shabby people.

Mr. Jessel returned the stare.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen."

The tallest of the three, a big, lusty, hook-nosed athlete, in a green suit and a claret-coloured waistcoat, was so condescending as to nod at the cobbler. Mr. Jessel's glance reverted to his daughter's face as she set the beer down at his elbow. There was mortified impatience in the girl's blue eyes. Her father grasped the nature of the situation.

Mr. Jessel lifted his glass.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, "a little bit of business has brought me down town. You won't mind me having a little chat with my girl. You can trace the family likeness," and he chuckled.

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Rose had turned her back, and was pretending to arrange some of the glasses on the shelves.

"Rose, my dear."

"Yes, dad"—and she kept her back to him.

Mr. Jessel ignored her pique.

"Business is pretty brisk with us up at Ravenshoe. I sold the old sow yesterday; Mullens gave me three pound ten for her. Not bad, that, for Mullens, eh?"

Rose's shapely shoulders quivered. If her father had determined to spite her for her snobbery he could not have chosen a more subtle method.

"Willis gave me two loads of muck for the back garden for repairing his hobnails. It sometimes pays to take stuff instead of cash"; and Mr. Jessel glanced confidentially in the direction of the table.

Rose had a reflection of the scene in the glass behind the bar. The three beaux appeared greatly tickled, and Rose, in the vexation of her vanity, concluded they were laughing at her, as well as at her father.

"D'you think this is a monkey-house?" she asked, turning suddenly upon the three.

"Ask father," retorted the big man, regarding her with insolent relish.

The cobbler's glass was at his mouth. He drank deeply, wiped his beard on the back of his hand, and expectorated into a spittoon.

"Not so good as at the 'Spotted Dog,'" he remarked.

"Oh, shut up, dad!"

Mr. Jessel stared.

"Why, what's wrong, my dear? Got the ear-ache?"

"Yes, I have."

Mr. Jessel's long mouth curled expressively. He tilted his stool and twinkled amiably at the three men at the table.

"Any one of you gentlemen guess what's in that parcel of mine?"

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Rose picked up a duster and began to polish the counter, assuming an indifference that was far from convincing.

"Smells like leather," said one of the three.

"Sharp nose you've got, sir"—and Mr. Jessel winked. "Rose, my dear, when you want your boots mending, send over to me by the carrier. I expect you want most of your cash for those there red bows."

Mr. Jessel appeared to be a fixture, and the men at the table surrendered the floor to him and strolled towards the door. Rose nodded to them curtly, her eyes fixed upon the man in the green suit.

"Going to win to-morrow, George?" she asked.

"Three, love. Give you a pair of gloves if we don't."

He turned back, leant over the bar a moment, and said something to the girl in an undertone.

Rose shook her head, laughed, and looked at her father.

"Not business, George," she said, with an alluring tilt of the chin.

"You wait and see," and he walked out, with a patronising nod to the cobbler.

Mr. Jessel cocked an alert and inquisitive eye at his daughter.

"Who's the young man?" he asked.

Rose stared indifferently over her father's head.

"That's George Ramsden," she said. "But I don't suppose, dad, you are any the wiser for knowing it."

"And who's George Ramsden?"

"Oh, George—George is a big gun down here at Ravensmouth. He's just a swagger footballer, if you want to know. Played 'back' for one of the big League clubs. I guess they had to pay a pretty price to get George down here."

Mr. Jessel did not look particularly impressed.

"Then he earns a living by kicking a piece of leather about, does he?" he asked, with a sniff.

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"Just as you get your living by sewing brown paper on to boots, dad," said the daughter tartly.

Mr. Jessel looked at this madam of the bar with the cynical superiority of a man who knew something of the shady side of life.

"You needn't be rude, my dear," he said, "though my coat ain't of the same stuff as that of your young buck's here. You ain't quite the duchess yet, Rosie, though a professional gentleman in sporting toggery, with twopence in his pocket, very likely, comes and makes sheep's eyes at you over a glass of beer."

Rose looked down at her father as though quite ready to slap his face.

"I suppose I've a right to make my way in the world? Why don't you wear a decent hat, dad?"

Mr. Jessel removed the article from his head and studied it reflectively.

"Mr. Hat—Billy Hat," he said with solemn wag-gery, "don't you ever expect your children to be proud of you if you don't try and look twice the man you really are. A sixpenny tie and a thirty-shilling reach-me-down suit makes us haughty in this life!"

Mr. Jessel replaced his head-gear, picked up his parcel, and glanced at the clock.

"What about Tom, my dear?" he asked quietly.

"Tom!"

"Shall I tell him all the young dukes in Ravensmouth are licking your shoes? He saw me this morning, and asked me to give you his most respectful compliments, and to apologise for the fact that he has been unable to come over and make his bow to you in person, on account of business and prosperity in general. Is the phraseology lofty enough, eh?"

Mr. Jessel regarded her with irritating and satirical intentness.

"Tom's at the Red Ghyll. He wrote and told me about it."

"A very snug berth, too, from all I hear."

"Tom can't push. That's where he's weak, dad."

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He'll never be his own master, but will always pick his pay out of somebody else's coat-tails."

"So different from George!" said Mr. Jessel, with a sniff.

Rose showed by her manner that she was tired of the witticisms of the parental tongue.

"You'd better toddle," she said, "or you'll miss your train."

And Mr. Jessel toddled.

He met Tom Swaine in Ravenshoe that same evening, for Tom, be it confessed, had discovered an excuse for walking down into the town about the time he expected Mr. Jessel to return. He was not an admirer of the cobbler, but Rose's father could claim some glamour because of that same fatherhood. Nor did Mr. Jessel quite understand Tom Swaine.

"How is she?" he asked, his brown face colouring a little

Mr. Jessel looked as obtuse as any cow.

"Who?"

"Why, Rose."

"Oh, my daughter!"

Tom stared hard at him.

"She's very well, thank you, Tom. Having a gay time, I gather. Thinks us country folk very slow. You'd better run in one day and ask her yourself."

The younger man appeared troubled.

"Does she like the life?"

"Like gingerbread."

"I suppose she's happy?"

Mr. Jessel glanced at him curiously out of the corners of his eyes.

"Mind you put on your best toggery, my son," he said. "Rose is particular now she's got into such select company."

And Mr. Jessel went on his way, leaving Tom Swaine to digest the hints he had given him.



## CHAPTER VII

TOM was felling an oak in the south hedge of the orchard, with the master of the Red Ghyll standing by, and watching the boughs of the tree quiver as the wedge-shaped wound deepened in the trunk. Tom's blue shirt was open at the throat, the sleeves rolled well above the elbows, his tawny hair bare to the spring sun. There was something delightful in the clean, long-winded vigour of the man as he swung his axe and sent the white chips flying.

"She's tottering."

"Stand clear, there, sir!" and Tom fell back two paces, with an upward glance at the golden leaf-buds of the oak.

He stood poised thus for a moment, head thrown back, his brown throat showing to the breadth of his chest, a gleam of adventurousness in his eyes. There was something fine in the figure of the man—sinewy and alert, youth caught in the dramatic pose of strength and ardour. Richard Dathan looked at Tom instead of at the tree. What would such a painter as Madox Brown have given for such a pose?

"Stand clear, sir! I'll drive the wedge in. She'll fall well into the open."

In went the wedge of steel, driven home by ringing blows with the back of the axe. The tree's heart began to snap and break, cord after cord going till the boughs began to move against the blue. Tom sprang aside as the oak came down with a crash, dead wood crackling like musketry, boughs groaning as they bit into the earth. A great tremor seemed to pass through the tree, like the death tremor

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through the body of a dragon smitten down by some Arthurian spear.

"After all, it seems rather a sin."

Tom had been looking at the tree with something of the air of a philosopher.

"Well, it's done now, sir."

"Dead, but not discarded! We shall have part of him in the rustic-work of our rose arcade before a month is out."

"The trunk to the timber merchant and the bark to the tanner."

"If it's worth it."

"Nothing's worth wasting on the land," said Tom.

Richard Dathan picked up a bill and began lopping at some of the smaller boughs, while Tom's axe smote at the great limbs that spread from the trunk. He worked with a slight furrowing of his brows, his lips tightly shut, a man very much in earnest, and not sparing of the sap of his body where work was to be done. Richard Dathan did not appear inspired to emulate Tom in the matter of strength.

He was watching the swift havoc the axe wrought against this creature of two centuries. Like some old philosophical system that had taken years in the building, it fell apart before the fire and the aggressiveness of youth. Or, again, the tree seemed like a huge octopus, whose tentacles the man smote off one by one. The rhythmic swing of the axe, the scattering of the white wood flakes upon the green of the grass, had a mesmeric effect upon Richard Dathan's mind. He stood like an Oriental dreamer, watching Tom at work, letting the warm sunlight pour upon his head and the mystery of spring steal in upon his senses.

The woodman's rhyme could not go on eternally, and Tom stopped to rest, leaning upon his axe.

"Do you mind, sir, if I go down to Ravensmouth on Monday?"

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The dreamer appeared to wake suddenly and to descend from the ideal to the real.

"Easter Monday, is it not?"

"Yes."

"You had better take the whole day. It belongs to you by law, I believe."

Tom smiled and then looked thoughtful.

"The afternoon will do," he said.

"To see friends?"

"Well, yes"; and he went to work again abruptly, as though he had a grudge against the tree.

Richard Dathan sat down on the trunk, well out of reach of the flashing axe. He had heard more of Tom's affairs from Mrs. Portia Hermon than Tom imagined, for the lady of "The Mount," despite her exalted position, had a craze for knowing everything that was to be known about her plebeian neighbours. She called it "taking an intelligent interest in her surroundings," and though the interest was there, the intelligence may be questioned.

"Thinking of getting married, Swaine?" asked the man on the tree.

Tom did not appear to resent the question. He let his axe rest on the trunk and looked, not at Richard Dathan, but away towards the fir woods, blue with shadows beyond the blossom of the orchard.

"That depends, sir," he said slowly.

"On someone else?"

"On someone else."

Richard Dathan was watching Tom with an intentness that seemed to betray some subtle interest in the matter.

"Mr. Jessel's daughter, is it not?"

"Yes"; and Tom set to work again.

After a minute or more he broke off suddenly, like a man whose thoughts out-importune the need of the utilitarian moment. It was not part of Tom's nature to blurt out his affairs to any casual friend. Much of his manhood was hidden even from his own mother.

"I'm worried about the girl, sir," he said curtly.

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The man on the tree trunk said nothing for the moment.

"You can't understand her, perhaps?"

"That's not far wrong."

"Does she want to marry you?"

"That's what I can't fathom."

Tom was stripping the bark from a dead bough with his fingers, frowning hard and staring at the grass.

"She's just like an April sky, sir. You never know what the next mood will be. She took it into her head this year to take a place in Ravensmouth, and she wouldn't listen to a word I said."

"What sort of a place?"

"In one of those damned smart pubs"; and Tom's face was a study in sturdy fanaticism. "I can't understand the girl wanting to take up such a life as that."

Richard Dathán looked at Tom with a flash of understanding.

"I suppose she likes to be admired—most women do."

"There's no harm in that, sir; but what sort of admiration does a girl get in such a place? Dirty blackguards saying things to her that no clean girl ought to hear. On my honour, sir, I can't think the better of her for wanting such a life."

"Is she happy in it?"

Tom looked grim.

"She seems to be. Her father told me she was having a gay time; and a man ought to know what that might lead to."

He picked up the axe again and began to send the white chips scattering. The very fierceness of the work seemed to hint at the impatient loyalty that was baffled in its purpose.

"So you are going in to see her, Swaine?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know what I should do?"

Tom faced round.

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"It seems to me that you owe something to yourself. Try the girl and see whether she is worth all this or not."

"Well, sir?"

"Ask her to give up the place or to give up you. She won't hesitate if she has the true stuff in her. It's no use being too patient with some people. She'll not think the less of you; I'll wager that."

Tom stared straight into the distance.

"I believe you're right," he said; "and it's not much good my playing the coward."

## CHAPTER VIII

THE Easter Monday crowd streamed into the Ravensmouth football enclosure, where red-lettered placards at the gates advertised the presence of one of the leading Southern League clubs. It was the "star" contest of the season, so far as the Ravensmouth enthusiasts were concerned, and the ropes along the line were already sagging under the weight of the crowd. The long, zinc-roofed stand was loquacious with bank holiday bourgeoisie. Bunting fluttered overhead; the little green and white flags flapped cheerfully, and the brass band on the field played "La Mattichiche" with a gallantry that set the spectators whistling and shuffling their feet.

Rose Jessel, in a big light blue hat, a smart tailor-made coat, and other pertinent accessories, had won her way with a girl friend to one of the best benches in the stand. Life was worth living to such a lady as Miss Jessel when she was one of the few pretty women among a crowd of men. The lower middle-class male does not hesitate to do homage to beauty with a thoroughly appreciative stare, and Rose Jessel had no objection to being stared at when she was happy in the conviction that her hat suited her just as a hat should..

"Gracious, Gertie! Doesn't the band make you feel you want to foot it? La, la, la, la-la-lala. It's prime—that two-step."

"Barkis is willin'," said a voice from the next bench.

Miss Jessel knew nothing of Dickens, but she accepted the remark in the light of a compliment.

"Some people aren't shy, Gert, are they?"

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"Can't help it," said another voice; "nor could Adam."

And the two girls tittered and nudged each other.

"Here they come!"

A gathering cheer rose from the crowd as the two teams filed out from their dressing-rooms in the pavilion. The Ravensmouth Rangers were in green and white, their opponents in black and gold. The band struck up a tune with a warlike lilt in it as George Ramsden kicked the ball over the spectators' heads into the field.

"Play up, the Rangers!"

"Good old George!"

"Go it, boys!"

"Are we downhearted?"

The crowd cheered the men as they streamed into the field, greeting them with affectionate brevities and familiar "Berts" and "Sids." These eleven stalwarts in their green-and-white halved shirts were as many heroes to the enthusiasts along the ropes. They were studied and admired with awe and affection as they gathered in front of the near goal and practised "shooting."

"There's George," and Rose Jessel nudged her friend.

"Where?"

"The great big chap there. Look what a chest he's got on him. You watch George bundle them about when he gets to work."

To the uninitiated the notoriety of a professional footballer may appear strange and incomprehensible, but it must be confessed that George Ramsden—or "the Ram," as his admirers called him—was a more popular and stared-at celebrity than the local Member, or any mere private citizen, however worthy of the town's gratitude. Great, lusty blackguard that he was, his keen self-confidence and masterful strength seemed to catch the public fancy. The youngsters would loiter at the ropes after a match was over to see George Ramsden swagger off the field, very

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muddy, perhaps, and sweating like a stallion. Nor was it the lads alone who found a fascination in the fine animal fitness of the man. It was a type that attracted women also, the sex-feeling selecting the strongest among the males.

"Go it, the boys!"

The Rangers' centre forward had kicked off, and the whole field was on the move. There was some sharp passing and tackling before the enemy's right wing got possession and came down the field in fine style towards the Ravensmouth goal. The crowd straining over the ropes was very quiet for the moment. The tension soon relaxed, however, for George Ramsden bundled the "inside right" off the ball and cleared finely with a strenuous kick.

The crowd roared.

"Well played, the Ram!"

"George ain't very gentle."

"Gosh, he's a stunner! See that bloke look as though he'd run against a bloomin' elephant?"

The Ram, head held high, his broad shoulders squared, watched the fight with an alert glitter of the eyes and took the plaudits of the crowd as though nothing but his due.

"Isn't he fine, Gert?"

Rose was leaning forward, her face flushed, her eyes eager.

"Did you see him send that chap flying? Strong! There's not a man on the field can touch him. Go it, George, old boy! It does me good to see you standing there like a rock."

The white and green rushed a goal. A great roar went up from the crowd, a mad burst of exultation that would have seemed foolish to one who had never been infected with the sheer animal zest of the game. Hats waved, hands clapped, faces looked as jovial as though the nation had won a victory. The paid players of the town club had manœuvred a piece of leather into a net between two white posts. Shout, boys, shout!



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Back they came to start afresh, George Ramsden glancing towards the stand as he strode down the field. He caught sight of Rose, winked and waved a hand. Miss Jessel responded with a flourish of her muff.

"Good old George!" And she looked as proud as any medieval lady saluted by the knight whose deeds had set the whole lists ringing.

One of the few persons on the ground unaffected by the furor of it all was Tom Swaine, from Ravenshoe. He had gone to the "Golden Fleece," and had been informed there that Miss Jessel had been given an afternoon off, and that he might find her in the football enclosure. Tom had marched out of the place with a hot-headed impulse to return to Ravenshoe by the next train. He had written to Rose to warn her of his coming, and the casual nature of the thing had hurt his pride.

But Tom had a steady reserve of common sense, and he had made his way to the football ground, paid his sixpence, and elbowed his way to the second row behind the ropes. The so many hundred people present were watching an inflated leather sphere, while Tom was looking for a single face. It was not long before he recognised the girl seated in the grand-stand in the middle of a group of men. Whether she was one of a party Tom could not tell at a distance of a hundred yards. He saw her wave her muff to someone on the field, and since she did not look in his direction, Tom concluded that the message was not for him.

There is much mulishness in man; and an obstinate mood took possession of Tom as he watched the game with perfunctory interest. He had made up his mind to wait outside the gate for Rose and to ask her bluntly whether she had had his letter:

"Down him, George; down him!"

The enemy's "outside right" was sprinting down the line, following up a long forward pass that had been made by his inside man. The Ram was also

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racing for the ball, while the crowd roared and strained against the ropes. Tom saw the big man tear up in the full strength of his stride, lift the ball away with a mighty kick, and crash into the "winger," who had sprinted to the last yard in hope of tricking the back.

He was a mere youngster, and the shock of the charge sent him head over heels as cleanly as a shot rabbit, and he lay on the ground squirming, the wind knocked out of him, while the referee's whistle blew "man hurt."

Tom felt sorry for the lad, but the crowd exulted. "George busted into him pretty hard, eh?"

"Great big hefty devil! Reckon the women think him fine!"

"George has an eye in him!"

"You bet."

The winded "winger" was soon on his legs again, but Tom made his way back to the gate before the whistle blew "time," so as to get clear before the rush of the crowd came. He left the ground, and, crossing the road, posted himself on the opposite kerb, so that he should have a view of the people as they poured out. Tumultuous cheering hailed the conclusion of the match, with the home professionals victorious by three goals to two.

Out came the crowd, squeezing, jostling, laughing, talking—a human mill-race frothing with a feverish exultation. Tom wondered what they found in the sport to lift them up to such a furor of enthusiasm. He watched the stream of faces as they came pouring out—stupid, sensual faces, many of them, casts of every type and temper. It took some minutes for the ground to belch its human flood, but Tom saw nothing of Rose Jessel, and began to think that he must have missed her in the crowd.

Possibly there was another gate. He crossed the road to inquire, and questioned the official at the turnstile, a fat, flap-cheeked man with a skin the colour of tallow.

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"Is there another gate here?"

"No. Lost somebody?"

"Yes."

"Go in and have a look round."

Tom went in and reconnoitred the ground and the grand-stand. His eyes travelled towards the pavilion and its dressing-rooms on the far side of the field. A big blue hat showed up against the turf bank below the building, and a figure that Tom recognised as Rose Jessel's. She had a girl with her, and appeared to be waiting for someone in the pavilion.

Tom's upper lip tightened.

He began to walk to and fro, casting sharp glances towards the distant Rose, and debating whether he should beat a retreat or stand for an explanation. Rose and her friend were strolling up and down outside the pavilion. Tom decided to investigate the matter further before staking his pride upon a decision.

A quarter of an hour passed. Tom saw a big man appear from the pavilion and come slowly down the steps. Rose and the girl turned to meet him. A second man followed the first, dodging a wet sponge that some hand from within hurled vigorously at his head. They appeared to have changed their clothes in a hurry, for the big fellow was fastening the buttons of his claret-coloured waistcoat. The men joined the two girls, and then the group, splitting into couples, moved towards the gate, Rose and the big man walking together.

Tom hesitated a moment and then turned and retreated. He went to his original post on the far side of the road and waited for Rose and her friends to appear. The big blue hat was first at the gate, and Tom had a glimpse of Rose turning a laughing, impudent face to the man who followed her, while with her muff she gave him a buffet on the ear. Tom recognised the man as George Ramsden, the darling of the crowd.

Rose, happening to glance across the road, caught

sight of Tom. She appeared in no wise disconcerted by his sullen, battle-boding face, but beckoned to him with her muff. The Ram threw a sharp glance in the direction of her signal.

"Hallo, Tom ! "

Tom stood irresolute a moment, and then, with a cool nod, walked, man-wise, in the opposite direction. He heard Rose laughing as he went his way.

"Sulky dog ! " said a man's voice.

Tom's ears tingled.

"I suppose I'm a fool," he thought; "but I'm damned if I'm going to pretend that I'm pleased."

## CHAPTER IX

AT the shimmering hour of seven on an April morning, with the wide world bathed in a sheen of silver, Tom stood turning over new soil two spits deep in the piece of grassland that had been added to the garden. Of all labour deep digging is the slowest and most conscientious of necessities, and it may be put forward as a sure test of a man's thoroughness in his work. Tom was hard at it, turning brown soil upon brown soil, when a stir and a clutter among the hens in the orchard told of the glint of the meal-tin and the morning's breakfast.

Richard Dathan had an interested mob of hens about his feet as he came out into the orchard, where the grass was wet with dew. The sunlight fell upon the plumage of the birds, bringing out an iridescence of green and purple, of buff, and of gold. One gorgeous Seigneur of the Order of Minorca kept sundry gay cockerels in peace towards each other. There was much scrambling and pushing about the meal troughs, though the Grand Seigneur was dignified by having the tin apart to himself.

The Australian came through the gate in the new fence of split chestnut wood and saw Tom's spade devouring the green turf.

"Slow work—that," he said, with a proper appreciation of the depth of the man's digging.

"It is worth it, sir."

The bright spade glinted in the sunlight, kicked in vigorously by a heavy boot, and lifted and turned by a pair of strong brown arms.

"I should like to join you at that, Tom."

Tom straightened up and looked at the slim, boyish figure in the loose grey suit.

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"It's heavier than it looks, sir."

"So much the better. I will get another spade and try. At all events, I shall get an appetite for breakfast."

He went off to the tool-shed, and came back with a brand-new spade—label and all—over his shoulder. Tom looked thoughtful. Digging was not a popular exercise with many who were compelled to do it.

"Shall I start at the far end and meet you in the middle, Tom?"

"If you like, sir. I am turning the top spit into the bottom, grass and all, and breaking it up—like this."

"I see."

"What are your boots like?"

Tom scrutinised his master's footgear.

"A heavy boot on the spade helps," he said.

Richard Dathan hung his coat on the fence, turned up the sleeves of a loose white shirt, showing a pair of forearms as white as a woman's. He set to zealously enough, Tom watching him out of the corner of an eye.

The amateur did not progress very rapidly. He held his hands wrong, lacked the instinctive kick of the left heel, and struggled with the tool too earnestly, being desirous of turning too big a sod. Tom said nothing for a while. Five minutes' work saw the master unnecessarily flushed and hot.

"Heavy soil, Tom, surely?"

"Fairly solid, sir. You waste your strength."

They had worked close to one another, and Tom stuck his spade into the trench.

"Give me a lesson, Tom."

Tom crossed over and took the other's spade.

"It looks so simple, sir. See, put your hands—like this."

He took Richard Dathan's hands, and, wondering at their slenderness, arranged them on the handle.

"Now, swing it in sharply; make three cuts in the

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turf—if you like. Then use your foot, so—and just turn the stuff over like that.”

The Australian worked for half a minute under Tom’s guidance.

“I see the subtlety,” he said, looking at Tom with a flushed laugh; “it is as much boot as hands.”

“That’s it.”

And Tom went back to his own spade.

They worked in silence for five minutes, drawing apart and then together, Tom accounting for two-thirds of the spit, while the amateur laboured with the other. At the end of the five minutes Richard Dathan stood up to rest, looking out over the landscape, vivid under the morning sun. It was a land of hills and of valleys, of far vistas, height beyond height, blue, nebulous and strange. Here and there the sharp cone of an oast-house rose amid the woods like the timber cap on the tower of an old French château. Sometimes a white church spire cut the blue ridge of a hill, or a red roof glimmered from the early green of spring.

The master of the Red Ghyll turned to again. He and Tom approached one another. They began to talk, and the talk drifted towards a topic that concerned Tom Swaine and Rose Jessel.

“What kind of a day did you have in Ravensmouth?”

Tom sent the spade in with a vicious dig of the heel.

“I spent it by myself,” he said.

“Don’t talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“There is not much to talk about.”

“Oh!”

“The girl didn’t trouble about me, so I didn’t trouble about her. That’s the long and short of it.” And Tom’s mouth closed like a trap.

Richard Dathan looked at his companion with an interest that was not purely impersonal.

“Then that is the end of it all?”

Tom seemed grave.

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"I don't know, sir," he said.

"Anyone else in the affair?"

"There usually seems to be."

"The kind of man you would like the girl to marry?"

Tom gave his master a square, straight gleam of the eyes.

"There is a sort of man you feel you want to hit in the mouth the very first glimpse you get of him. The fellow's like that."

"A terse way of putting it, Tom."

"Perhaps you have felt it yourself, sir?"

"Perhaps I have."

They both went on with their digging after a minute's rest on their spades. Tom's eyes were on the brown soil, and the lines of his face were stern.

"It is funny how women will try to hurt a man," he said, "just to please their own vanity."

"Not the best women, Tom. Your mother, for instance, or your sister."

Richard Dathan had already spoken of that Australian sister who was his twin in soul and body. Tom Swaine was silent awhile.

"Do you know, sir, sometimes I almost hate the girl."

"There is nothing new in that, Tom."

"I suppose it is because I see the small, mean things in her. And I—notice them too much. I can't help it. They are just the thorns, and they are always there."

Richard Dathan stooped to pick up a dock.

"If you feel like that, Tom——"

"I know, sir; but then—I have been in love with the girl since I was eighteen. She has changed the last year. One tries to keep blind to things, and deaf to them, but they push through and hurt one's better self. I shall have my talk with Rose, if she will give me the chance."

"Why not seize it?"



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"Perhaps I shall, sir. But I am not going to be treated like a dog, to be whistled to when she pleases."

An instinctive sympathy had sprung up between these two, a sympathy that a fortnight's comradeship in orchard, wood and garden had deepened. They were always discovering surprises in each other—those surprises that are as mysterious and delightful as the finding of treasure-trove in some unexpected place. Tom Swaine had been at the Ravenshoe Grammar School, and he read more than many people who looked on literature as the privilege of a clique. He had one of those clean, stalwart, lovable natures that come in primitive aliveness with the deeper things of the mind. Tom was no prig with a carefully conned quotation poised upon his tongue and the "Science Manual" peeping out of his jacket pocket. He loved books—Nature books, books made by true men—because it was his natural impulse to love them, and not because he emulated the intellectual snobbery of a certain type of country schoolmaster.

The figure in the grey suit went in to breakfast, leaving Tom to his own thoughts and his spade. It was one of those April days that are full of growth, of rich, sweet eagerness that thrills in the rising sap. And since the kettle had not yet boiled and Mrs. Marvin was still frying bacon, the master of the Red Ghyll wandered back into the garden, welcoming one of those dreamy interludes when the eye desires nothing more than to travel from flower to flower.

Narcissus, swinging his golden poll in the morning sunlight, was not troubled with problems of psychology, even though the pose of pretending to see beyond the blue of the mental spectrum is popular with contributors to certain highly cultured magazines. The year had the sweet mouth of April, and a vague wonder in its virginal eyes. Life was vibrant everywhere—impulsive, passionate life that burst through the brown soil into the sun.

And the experiment?

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Truly it was fair life here upon the southern hills, near to the heart of Nature, near to rich and primitive things. One could brush the dew at dawn from the grass, dabble amid wild primroses, labour, and dream, and let the twilight steal on with a welcome sense of rest. But life leads to life. The bees work everywhere—those spiritual bees, carrying the mysterious pollen into the hearts of those who live. Man and woman are part of a primitive scheme. "I will do this and that," say they, and in the doing of it work magic within themselves.

Dr. Habershone might have been vastly interested had he had a certain mind spread out before him so that he could trace the intricacies, the subtleties, the tendencies that were still in embryo. Spring on an upland farm, life in the orchard and the garden, sweet sleep at night, hunger and health in the day: whither do such things lead? Towards the smothering of inevitable instincts, or towards the quickening of things that every soul must seek to satisfy?

What were the thoughts in the master of the Red Ghyll's mind that morning?

"I should like to see Rose Jessel."

And again:

"One can learn so much from a woman's face—and her dress."

And yet again:

"A barmaid! I wonder why the best men are so often fooled by the worst women?"

Now, Tom had promised himself an opportunity, and the opportunity seemed to appear that very evening, when he met Nat Jessel on the road past the Red Ghyll. The cobbler had walked up from Ravenshoe to leave at "The Mount" two pairs of boots that he had mended.

"Had a card from Rose," he said. "She's coming over on Wednesday. Better look in, Tom, and have a cup o' tea."

The younger man did not appear so overwhelmingly eager.

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"Is Rose bringing any friends with her?" he asked.

"She says nothing about it on the card."

"If I can get my work done I will come in for an hour."

Mr. Jessel winked at him.

"The work 'll wait, Tom, but women won't."

## CHAPTER X

WEDNESDAY was "early closing day" at Ravenshoe, and the shutters were up in front of Mr. Anthony Jessel's small shop, while the cobbler, in his shirt-sleeves, pottered contentedly about his back-garden, weeding the borders and trimming the grass edges with a pair of shears. Mr. Jessel, like many men of his type, was a gardener by instinct, and the few rods of ground at the back of the cottage were worked to the last square yard so far as profit and prospect were concerned. Nat Jessel was not cursed with the cabbage and cauliflower mania—that is to say, he had sufficient æstheticism to allow himself the luxury of a grass plot and of flowers.

The side bell rang about three o'clock, and the cobbler put his tools away, bustled into his coat, and went to wash his hands in the scullery. Voices reached him from the side door—his sister Jane's chaffinch-like "pink-pink," Rose's gay, chattering treble, and the deep caw of a man's bass. Anthony Jessel poked his sharp, white beard forward with an expression of aggressive alertness that he assumed when surprised. Rose had brought a friend with her, and that friend was not Tom Swaine.

In ten minutes they were out in the garden, sitting on the benches under the apple tree on the little lawn—Rose, her father, her aunt, and "the Ram." The day had the warmth of June, and Mr. Jessel's borders were gay with anemones and narcissi, and clumps of forget-me-not and gillyflower. The apple tree was shedding its pink and white petals on the grass, their colouring not more delicate than the slight flush on Miss Rose Jessel's face.

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"The garden looks prime, dad! Doesn't it, George?"

Rose's rattle of small-talk had for its duty the dispelling of a certain atmosphere of constraint that seemed to clog the spirits of the party. George Ramsden's personality did not fuse at the first trial with Mr. Jessel's shrewd air or Miss Jane's Quakerish quietness. None of them was in an arm-chair mood as yet. The professional gave most of his attention to a new pair of yellow boots. An occasional tug at a gold-buttoned waistcoat and a half-smothered yawn were the solitary evidences of his vitality.

"Isn't the garden a picture, George?"

"Nutty," was that gentleman's terse verdict.

Mr. Jessel had not heard the phrase before. He cocked a studious, bird-like eye at the professional.

"Same as 'spicy,' I suppose?" he said. "Funny how these bits of slang have their fashion, just like hats. Fond of gardening, Mr. Ramsden?"

Rose giggled.

"He likes to see other people work," she explained. "George could stand all day with his hands in his pockets and watch men picking up a road."

"That's true," said George with a grin; "it's soothing."

"When you can afford it," added the cobbler dogmatically.

The conversation had not warmed much as yet. Miss Jane Jessel, sitting bolt upright on a very uncomfortable rustic chair of Mr. Jessel's making, sniffed nervously at intervals.

"That's a pretty frock you've got, my dear."

"Rather taking, isn't it?"

She was a picture in pink muslin, with white bows at the shoulders—a dress that suggested the sensuous sloth of June. George Ramsden regarded her with sleepy approval. Rose had brought him with her much against her will; not that she did not desire his company; but the cobbler's cottage was not a

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mansion, and there was no atmosphere of artificial smartness about its occupants.

"Did you read about the match on Monday, dad?"

Rose's turning of the conversation was a compliment to the professional. Mr. Jessel shook his head.

"George saved the game for us. Just look at him, the lazy dog!" and she prodded him with a pink sunshade. "You wouldn't think he'd trouble himself about anything, would you? My hat, but it was spanking! You could hear the crowd shouting down at the Fish Market."

"Must have been money in it," said Mr. Jessel, with irrelevant relevancy.

"Money, dad?"

"The club's a financial success, I gather?"

"Paying five per cent., and the directors drinking champagne," said the Ram, with indolent arrogance.

"They're going to give George a 'benefit,' dad. Aren't they, George?"

The big man nodded.

"Nice little nest-egg, eh?" asked Mr. Jessel.

"The best part of fifty quid, I hope."

"You'll be buying a pub soon, and driving a dog-cart with red wheels," said the cobbler.

"Very likely. There's money in the game when you're first-class, and know how to work the machinery."

George Ramsden and Mr. Jessel appeared to discover a Masonic bond of union from that moment; for both of them were hard, brow-beating, money-making mortals. They differed, however, in the disbursement of their cash, for the professional spent his on smart clothes and the sex, and Mr. Jessel deposited his in the savings bank.

It was into the midst of this little family gathering that Tom Swaine was ushered by Mr. Jessel's maid-servant of fourteen. Tom's blue eyes remained fixed for a moment in a hard and displeased stare. Then he

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was shaking hands with Rose, who had jumped up with pert aplomb.

"Glad to see you, Tom. I've a bone to pick with you."

Tom smiled with his mouth, but not with his eyes.

"What did you sneak off for like that the other day? Shy—eh? You don't know Mr. Ramsden, I fancy."

The two men stared at each other by way of acknowledging the introduction. Mr. Jessel bit the stem of his pipe, and watched the little drama with the imperturbability of a philosopher.

"Peas promise well, Tom?"

"Very fair"; and he sat himself down on the bench beside Rose with an air of proprietorship that made the Ravensmouth Ram look hard at him.

The child of fourteen came tottering out from the cottage, with a huge black tea-tray and a white cloth over her arm.

"Dolly—you be careful! You're slopping the milk over! Oh, my gracious!"

Miss Jane Jessel bristled with anxiety, while the child's thin face above the tray was a study in strained suspense. Tom jumped up and took the thing from her, with its burden of crockery, and plates of cake and bread and butter.

"I'll hold on while you lay the cloth," he said.

George Ramsden studied him with frank and contemptuous disrelish. His eyes met Rose's. They were both of them ready to be amused at Tom's expense.

Tea did not prove a genial meal, despite Miss Jessel's vivacity and her father's dry and pertinent humour. Tom sat straight and stiff on the bench beside the girl, and kept a silence that would have seemed gauche had not his tight mouth and steady eyes offered a surer reading of the mood. George Ramsden appeared mainly concerned with eating cake and drinking tea. Miss Jane Jessel fidgeted her handkerchief in her lap, and jerked irrelevant remarks across the table.

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"You gentlemen smoke?"

Mr. Jessel rose from his chair, disappeared into the house, and returned with an envelope full of cigars. George Ramsden accepted one with resignation. Tom excused himself on the plea that he had brought a pipe.

With the matchbox passing from hand to hand, Rose jumped up as though the sense of tension was intolerable. She began to wander about the garden, now and again putting in the steps of a waltz.

"Hallo, dad! you've cut down the old apple-tree!"

Mr. Jessel was sucking one of his execrable cigars.

"Root and branch. There's a nice job there for a strong and industrious young man."

He left his seat and trotted across the grass, the two young men following two paces apart, each walking as though the other were a mere negligible shadow.

"What a great beast of a stump, dad!"

"Ain't he a teaser! I've grubbed all the roots, but roll him out I can't. Shall have to get a neighbour in to help."

The great gnarled stump of the old tree looked like a huge black spider crouching in its pit. Rose stood on the pile of earth and pushed at it with her foot. Her father chuckled.

"You don't know the weight of old apple-wood," he said. "That there tree was the biggest and knottiest in Ravenshoe."

Some sudden spirit of devilry seemed to take possession of the girl.

"Try your strength, gentlemen," she said. "Three pulls a penny!"

The two men looked at each other like a couple of strange dogs.

"Want it lifted out?" asked the Ram.

"Of course we do."

"Supposing Mr. Swaine here has a try."



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Tom caught the challenge in the man's eyes. "A couple of ash-poles would do the job better," he said. "Mr. Ramsden ought not to dirty a new pair of boots."

They looked at each other again out of the angles of their eyes.

"Toss you for first shot," said the big man casually.

He spun a shilling. Tom called "Heads," and won.

Pulling up his sleeves, he stepped down into the hole, and got a good grip of the stump by two of the main roots. All the pluck and muscle of his well-knit body went into the uplift. Tom had the stump clear of the ground, but the weight was too much for him, and the thing sank back into its bed.

George Ramsden licked his lips and grinned. Tom stood up, took a deep breath, and then plunged at the stump a second time, with a grim setting of the teeth. Again he had it an inch or two from the ground, but lift it farther he could not.

Nat Jessel took the cigar from his mouth.

"Give over, lad," he said; "you'll strain a 'leader.' The thing's too heavy for ye."

"Let George have a try, Tom; he's a bigger man than you are."

The Ram took Tom's place, and, slipping his great paws well under the stump, lifted it slowly, steadily, and rolled it to one side, clear of the pit. Then he stood up, swept a significant look at Tom, and, after brushing the dirt from his sleeves, stepped out of the hole as though he had done nothing more than pick up a child's doll.

Rose held out the cigar to him that he had given her to hold. She had taken a playful puff at it, and pulled a very wry face.

"Good boy, George! Let's feel your muscle."

Ramsden bent his arm and stiffened his biceps, Rose feeling it with her small fingers, and looking mischievously into his face.

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"My—what an arm! Aren't you grateful, dad?"

Mr. Jessel had been puffing smoke calmly. Tom, stony-faced, was trying not to see the by-play between Rose and the Ram.

"Well, you've got a back on you, Mr. Ramsden. I reckon there's not a man in Ravenshoe could lift that there log. Tom's no baby, neither."

"It's the weight that tells," said the professional, pinching Rose's arm above the elbow.

Tom, angry with himself that he should be so human as to feel mortified, relit his pipe and prepared to show a sporting spirit. But George Ramsden was not the man to consider a rival's sentiments. He had much of the male animal in him—the brute arrogance of the master bull. Moreover, he appeared to exert a peculiar fascination over Rose by reason of the very masterfulness of his strength. She had no eyes for the weaker man, and almost fawned on Ramsden as they idled together round the garden. Tom, who had the sense to understand it all, felt a fierce desire to hammer the big man with his fists.

Nat Jessel drew him aside to show him his spring crops.

"Look at those peas—a picture, aren't they? Prime show of carrots I had last year, do you remember?"

Tom remembered well enough, but for the moment he was listening to the voices of the others. A sudden squeak of laughter from the girl brought Tom's chin round to his right shoulder. He had a glimpse of George Ramsden pinching Rose's neck with his fingers. One glimpse was sufficient for Tom. He turned back to Mr. Jessel, whose enthusiasm for his garden had elements of refinement.

"Your beans are up early—there, Mr. Jessel."

"Look healthy, don't they? Come and have a peep at my young marrows and tomatoes."

Tom humoured the cobbler, and then pulled out his watch.

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"It's time I moved," he said; "I've a job or two up at the Red Ghyll before dark."

Anthony Jessel had too shrewd an insight into human nature to wish to detain him.

"Go—must you? Rose! Hallo! what's become of 'em?"

\* The pair had disappeared. Miss Jane Jessel came out from the cottage.

"Rose in there?" and Mr. Jessel pointed with his cigar.

"She's taken the young man to see the park."

Mr. Jessel frowned.

"What train are they going back by?"

"Don't ask me, Nat"; and Miss Jessel denied any interest in the flirtation.

"Come back and have some supper, Tom."

"I'm afraid I shan't have time, thanks all the same."

"Just as you please—just as you please."

Tom said good-bye to them both, and, going out by the side gate, made his way into the street. He stood there a moment as though undecided, his face betraying the intensity of his temper. Then he turned on his heel and marched off towards the park, whose oaks were already golden under the light of the evening sun.

Tom entered the gate by the old mill, where the sluices thundered and the great pool stretched away, one broad sheet of silver, save where the shadows of the beech-trees made the water black as jet. On the height above the towers and battlements of the castle, with pinnacle and bartizan, cut the gold of the western sky. A bell tolled in one of the towers.

Away to the north the park swept, slope on slope of short, crisp sward; valley winding out of valley; thickets of old thorns running like quaint arabesques across the green; towering "hangers" crowning the chalk cliffs that broke the smooth contours of the slopes. Tom saw the deer coming down to the lake to drink. The flutter of a pink dress had gone from

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him up a winding path into a beech-wood, whose maze of branches made the sky a glimmering net. Tom followed that flash of colour, driven on by some irresistible impulse within himself, hating his own thoughts, and the devil in him that made him sneak and spy. Faint laughter and the sound of voices came back to him amid the beech-trees. Presently he heard Rose singing. She broke off suddenly with a sharp, curious cry—a cry that had no terror in it, but only surprised desire.

It was dark and the stars were bright when Tom came down the path to the lake again. He walked fast, like a man hurrying from something, his face pinched as though he had been facing an east wind. On the foot-bridge over the main sluice he halted a moment, staring at the water. But, whatever the impulse was—towards battle or towards revenge—it was soon past with him, and Tom walked on.

He avoided Ravenshoe town, and took a lane that led round the castle wall towards the high ground above.

Before he reached the cottage he turned aside and leant over a gate, his cap off, his head between his hands. It was some little while before he walked on again, and then slowly, like a man tired.

A light was burning in the cottage, the window of the front-room shining a yellow square against the dark. The blind was up, and Tom, standing on the patch of grass in front of the gate, could see into the little room. His mother was sitting at the table, her work-basket before her, and with nothing more romantic than one of her son's shirts in her crippled hands. Her thin hair, drawn back from her forehead, showed a shimmer of silver in the light of the lamp.

For fully a minute Tom watched her needle go steadily to and fro, while more than once she raised her head as though listening, her face full of that gentleness that comes with the patient suffering of

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sorrow. Tom, grown man that he was, felt a storm of childish emotion grow big within his throat. He stood under the shadow of the hedge awhile before he could go in to his mother.

And though he said never a word of it all to her, her nearness soothed him, and the knowledge of that purity for which she stood to him in life.

## CHAPTER XI

It is a strange thing how long it may take a man to discover that a particular woman is vulgar, tawdry, and disloyal; many men never discover the truth until it is too late, for a superficial prettiness is sufficient to cover much that is treacherous and contemptible. Tom Swaine had long mistrusted his love for Rose. She had aroused in him the slow sense of being a fool and a dupe, and few men are sentimental enough to continue in such a position. Tom's eyes had been opened. He turned to wrench himself even from the faint glamour of the days when he and Rose had been nothing but boy and girl.

To help him to put such things out of his heart a man is glad of any fresh interests that he may find in life, and Tom found them at the Red Ghyll. He had a passion for work—a species of self-emulation that seized his strength and spread it abroad like seed upon fertile soil. Tom had the spirit of an athlete adapted to practical endeavour. It was not a matter of how many minutes it took him to run a mile, but how much grass his scythe could lay low, how much ground he could turn over in a day, how long the hedge was that could beat him against time. Nothing is so contagious as healthy out-of-door enthusiasm, and the two at the Red Ghyll were both healthy, and both inspired by the delight of making one patch of the earth more fruitful and more beautiful.

They had come to be friends, these two—friends in other things than their work. There had been a knitting up of sympathy between them, and Richard Dathan had looked into the deeps of the other's nature.

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They were building a pergola of split pine-trunks for the roses that they had contrived to smuggle into the lap of the young year, when Tom told the master of the Red Ghyll the truth about Rose Jessel. The sharp blows of Tom's hammer echoed back from the great thatched barn that was more a beautiful ruin than a place for the storing of a harvest. Twilight was falling, and the two enthusiasts were still at work, with the east full of violet shadows and bands of gold, pouring over the pine-woods. The colour of each flower blazed up in the green setting. Thrushes sang, sparrows played and twittered about the thatch. Even the split pine-trunks of the rose-arcade showed the patterning of their rough bark in green and black and red.

Tom had told his tale as he hammered home the nails, the Australian handing them to him, and helping to steady the cross-bars of the trellis.

"I am not going to think of her any more," said Tom. "What would be the good? I used to see things, and try to pretend that I had not seen them. A man may try at times to patch the present with the prettier stuff out of the past."

Tom's clean simplicity had something of pathos, something of irony. He was a little grim over the experience, and out of temper with himself.

"It is better to be wide awake than blind, Tom, even though one may sometimes dream dreams."

"What a mess we should have made of life," he answered, "Rose and I! It's not all her fault. We look at things differently."

"You have realised that, which is something."

"Well, sir, it is something to discover that one has not walked into a ditch."

The plaintive cry of the "cuckoo's mate" came like the call of some spirit of unrest. Spring evenings are often full of sadness, despite their beauty. The sun seems to linger regretfully upon the hills, and the night comes like one who loiters unhappily amid the shadows of the woods.

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Sometimes the white hands touched Tom's brown ones as they worked. One pair of eyes had a dreamy, inward look. They were quite content, working there together.

"You won't be able to see much longer."

"One more four-inch nail."

"I believe you had the last."

They bent over the nail-box at the same moment, and Tom's cheek brushed the other's forehead.

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"Here's one."

"Only a three-inch."

"Is it?" and the two hands groped together in the box.

"There must be one somewhere," said Tom.

"Supposing we turn the box out?"

"Not worth it now. I can make a three-inch do."

So much for the outer life. In the inner life also—the life of aspirations and ideas—these two were brought closer to one another by the entry of the one into the other's home. It was not the first time that Richard Dathan had walked up to Tom's cottage, where Mrs. Swaine put on her best lace cap and sat in the leather arm-chair by the parlour window. Mrs. Swaine's face looked almost as white as the chintz curtains beside the red geraniums on the window-sill. On a first visit a stranger may not notice everything, especially when a shy old lady makes the call an occasion of state.

It was on his second visit that Richard Dathan found a corner full of books behind the door. "They were Tom's books," his mother said, "though some of them had belonged to Magnus—Magnus Swaine, who had lived in the old days that would never come again." The books acquired a suggestive interest for the visitor. He went and stood by the shelves, letting his eyes rove here and there, his hands taking down a book from time to time.

Thoreau, Keats, Richard Jefferies, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Blackmore. What names upon the



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shelves of a cottage! Here, too, were the books of another fancy and another hand—Byron, Landor, Percy's "Reliques," Hallam's "Middle Ages," Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy"—books, too, that had been well handled, lived with, and loved. The master of the Red Ghyll took down "Lorna Doone," and great Jan Rid seemed to loom up dimly over the misty moors.

The instinctive thought rose within him:

"A man who lived with such books to have been in love with a barmaid!"

"But he is no longer in love," retorted the inward voice; "it was lad's love, and it has crumbled."

Richard Dathan turned with a book in his hand.

"I had no idea your son read so much, Mrs. Swaine."

Tom's mother was still a little shy of her visitor. One could tell that by the slight fumbling of her hands.

"The lad always had a love for books. He reads at night, sometimes more than is good for him. Tom bought most of them when we were better off. Some of those old ones belonged to his grandfather Magnus, and I fancy that's where the lad got his love of them. Magnus Swaine used to write verses himself, Mr. Dathan; Tom's got a bookful of it somewhere in his desk."

Mrs. Swaine reached for her spectacles that lay on the window-sill.

"There is one thing you might like to see, Mr. Dathan, and that is our great Bible. There are few like it down in this part of the country."

She put on her spectacles, and glanced to where the great book lay on the top of Tom's old oak bureau. Richard Dathan brought it and laid it on the table before her, and Mrs. Swaine opened it with the solemnity of one opening a book in church.

"You see, Mr. Dathan, we had our folk in the old days."

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The Australian bent over the book, where the births, marriages, and deaths of many generations were set down in fading writing upon the cover and fly-leaf. The varying characters of the Swaines might have been deciphered from the handwriting. Bold and virile; neat, careful, and confident; crabbed, shaky, and undisciplined—a gallery of old-world signatures. The dates ran back into the seventeenth century. Here was a John Swaine, merchant, and Damaris his wife, the names of their ten children, and the dates of their births. A Captain Peter Swaine had commanded a king's ship. Later, among the farmers, one found an apothecary, an attorney, a major in His Majesty's "Foot," a tanner, and a Popish priest. Against a few of the names there were ominous blanks, as though the records deserved nothing better than to be ignored. Many of the dead had been farmers—good county stock that had ruled, and drank, and bullied in the days of the Hanoverian kings.

"You must be proud of this," said the visitor at last.

Mrs. Swaine gazed out through the open window.

"It teaches me to remember, Mr. Dathan, what a changing world this is. I often wonder, sir, whether they would be proud of us, these dead people. We are not what they were."

The master of the Red Ghyll still bent over the great Bible.

"We lose and gain," he said quietly; "it is not all a matter of acres."

Richard Dathan carried the Bible back to the bureau.

"I wonder if I might see Magnus Swaine's poetry?" he asked.

"Yes, I am sure, Mr. Dathan. Let me see, now, where does the lad keep that book?"

She left her chair, took a key from a Wedgwood bowl on the mantelshelf, and opened Tom's bureau. In one of the recesses she found the old leather-

bound manuscript book, with a monogram in faded gold stamped upon it—the monogram of Magnus Swaine.

"May I take it away to read? I will be very careful with it, Mrs. Swaine."

"Do, sir, if you like. I never could get far myself with poor Magnus's writing. He loved the old place yonder, and he planted many of the trees. Magnus was quite a Solomon of a man hereabouts; people used to come to him from miles round to ask him all manner of things—more than they'd come to the lawyer or the parson."

Richard Dathan went on his way, leaving Mrs. Swaine with her knitting-needles behind the chintz curtains of the cottage window. He had a call to pay before returning to the Red Ghyll, Mrs. Portia Hermon having sent him a "sitting" of white leg-horns and a hamper full of bedding-plants for the garden, and his thanks were due to her. The lady of "The Mount" had taken the Australian into her favour, and spread over him her social wing. "I shall send all my friends to call on you," she had said. Yet, though the late Mr. Hermon's ambition had been to climb to county distinction upon a pile of biscuit-boxes, and though his widow had turned this pyramid of tin-plate into an autocratic little hillock capped by a very hideous house, her neighbours were at no necessity to carry their slips of pasteboard according to her commands. The time required to recognise a new-comer in the country varies in relation to the proportions of his house. If he rents or buys a mansion, everyone hears of it, and he is accepted immediately, unless he is too outrageous a Jew. It is not always a matter of snobbery. There are so many known niches of gentility in the neighbourhood, and when a stranger attempts to create a new niche by settling in a farm-house he is expected to bide his time. The place has not been within the social ken of the surrounding clique. The new-comer has to serve a probation, he and his heathenish

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house together, before they are accepted into the true Church and baptised. He is wisely ignored by the majority till someone discovers that he has lived there three years, has spent money, and is not flagrantly indecent.

Mrs. Portia Hermon was in a coquettish and amiable mood as she sat in the arm-chair beside her Benares tea-tray. Canon Winderbloss of Ravenshoe had one of her Dresden cups upon his knee. The canon was a man with a fine set of false teeth—a man who was always smiling, and who had the sense to conciliate the mammon of true righteousness. Someone had once christened him “Canon Good-form.” And, being an amiable and courtly man of the world rather than a Christian, he harmonised admirably with the social scheme that he found about him. Being moderately wealthy, he was not compelled to beg too pertinaciously. A serene and kindly man, he kept his congregation in countenance by habitually breaking the majority of the commands that Christ laid upon His followers. There was nothing quixotic or perfervid about him. He ignored all matters that it was comfortable and convenient to ignore.

Canon Winderbloss had been one of the few to call at the Red Ghyll. His two curates had followed in his steps—one a “broth of a boy,” loved by the whole neighbourhood for being the good fellow that he was; the other a very churchy youth, who had consumed a huge tea, and frankly declared that he was persecuted by half the spinsters in the parish. The two doctors had followed the clergy, the lawyers the doctors. Professional men have other considerations to remember. Their ledgers are ready to accept any useful addition to the community.

Canon Winderbloss did not tarry long at “The Mount” that afternoon. He mumbled a few anecdotes into his beard, smiled perpetually at Mrs. Hermon, wondered whether Mr. Dathan would care to interest himself in the Church Lads’ Brigade, and,

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receiving a direct negative, sided politely from the subject, threw in a few courtesies, and departed.

Mrs. Portia Hermon had certain characteristics that reminded her neighbours of Good Queen Bess. She was plain, autocratic, exceedingly self-satisfied, very shrewd in many matters, peculiarly foolish in others. Like the Tudor queen, Mrs. Hermon had one sentimental facet to her nature. And she had disclosed her egregiously sentimental aspect very early to Richard Dathan.

She took him out with her into the garden after Canon Winderbloss had gone, her pomposity melting in his presence to a sentimental motherliness that was ready to flow into still more foolish fancies. Richard Dathan had been treated on previous occasions to delightful ventures in light comedy—comedy so subtle and so piquant that his intuition had failed to grasp the full humour of the affair at first. It was possible to play the Essex or the Leicester to this Bess of Ravenshoe. She was ready to shower her favours upon him—vegetables, perennials for his garden, a cartload of young shrubs—even the loan of an Alderney cow. She had appeared to him in the beginning as a stiff yet neighbourly woman in the vague forties, very unpopular with the poor, despite her charities, probably because she made them feel that she knew them to be poor.

"So you really approve of the Red Ghyll?" she asked, as they stepped out on to the terrace.

"I am wholly in love with the place."

"How satisfactory! And you still find the man Swaine—suitable?"

"Quite. He is really too good for such a berth."

Mrs. Hermon stared slightly behind her glasses.

"You think so?"

"Tom Swaine has character. He is better educated than I am."

"Oh—a very decent young man; inclined to be a little above himself. The—I consider him a very

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fortunate young fellow in having such a place—and such a master. The family has been sinking for the last twenty years.”

They passed down from the terrace to the formal garden, where a number of geometrical beds were cut in the sleek turf. There was not a weed to be seen in the gravel paths, not a daisy or a dandelion in the grass. The very tulips in the beds looked stiff, orthodox, and prosperous.

“The Swaines were always too opinionated,” said the lady, marching her visitor through the garden. “Some people always trade on their past. I hope you will not allow the man to presume. He may think that he has a kind of authority down yonder, because his grandfather planted many of the trees.”

“I see no signs of presumption.”

“I am glad to hear it. I always treat my servants as servants; it is the best attitude to adopt. How sweet these wallflowers smell! Have you heard from your sister in Australia lately?”

“About a week ago.”

“You think she will join you—over here?”

“I cannot tell—yet. I am sure she would love the life.”

“I am sure she would. And it always helps a man socially to have a woman in the house.”

Mrs. Hermon had already marched her sympathy into the Australian's camp. She was ready to take command of him and his affairs, and to suffer her sentimental pomposities to parade in his service. Her cold and severe exterior made this foible of hers all the more quaint and amusing. No woman provided her neighbours with more palatable gossip. Her characteristic contradictions evoked a perennial smile. The truth of the old saying seemed proven, even in the most grim and unexpected climate. A woman must feel herself fond of something. Religion and love are but different developments of the same hobby.

Richard Dathan departed with a hothouse rose in

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his buttonhole—a rose that had been plucked by Mrs. Hermon's hands.

Under the shade of a yew that evening the Australian opened Magnus Swaine's book, and glanced over the pages where lay the thoughts of a man long dead. The poetry had a robust simplicity, and passion and tenderness that welled up from the heart of the world. It was full of vigorous imagery—the imagery of an Homeric mind carving great visions out of the night and the dawn. The music was crude at times—crude with a kind of primeval strength.

Such things as these wrote Magnus Swaine :

“The ripe cornfields roll to me like the sea  
When the wind blows over the lip of the hill.”

And again, in a fir-wood :

“A thousand trees sail with the storm,  
And the bracken bubbles at their stems.”

Many of the poems had a more intimate and personal note. There were scraps of prose thrust in here and there—short, sturdy sentences that seemed to ring like the blows of an axe. The rugged sense of the writer was like the wisdom of some old battle-king. One could see him cleaving off some great yew-bough, shaping it, stringing it, and standing, with glowing face, while he shot his arrows against all things that he despised.

Between two pages Richard Dathan came upon a few pressed flowers—the ghost-flowers of eighty years ago—“From the posy Kate wore over her heart.” And in the lines that followed the pulse of a great love seemed to beat.

It was not long before the master of the Red Ghyll discovered that there were pieces of prose in modern writing upon the left-hand pages. The ink was unfaded. Richard Dathan guessed from whose hand they came.

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"When the spring comes," wrote Tom, "there seems new blood in a man's body. It is a miracle, a transfiguration, a new birth."

"Of all things I love the scent of hay with the dew on it at dawn."

"Set your face to meet the clouds. Our English sky is a fair picture of what life is. If you have seen your father die of a broken pride, and your mother praying beside his bed, then you may know what you may look for in this world."

"Some people get everything, and enjoy nothing. Others who have little, enjoy what the rich people do not see. Rich people exist to be amused, the poor live; that is why the poor always seem to me so much more alive."

"Money has its limitations. Even a millionaire cannot corner the sun, or put up a fence round the stars."

"Rose has gone to Ravensmouth. I am troubled for her sake. She has so much of the moth about her."

More intimate records followed, and Richard Dathan closed the book suddenly with a sense of intrusion and a flush of shame. He sat a long while with the book upon his knees, watching the Scotch firs, whose tops were swaying gently with the wind. He could picture Magnus Swaine from that faded shred of a memory between the leaves of a book, and the years had passed like clouds across the sky. He had gained a half-guilty glimpse also into the grandson's heart, to find there a deep instinct of reverence, of wonder and love of the fair earth. How superficial might the surface seem! how deep and unexpected the inner nature!

Richard Dathan found Tom putting his tools away, and showed him the book. Both of them blushed, and looked shy of one another for the moment.

"Your mother told me of this, Tom. I borrowed it. I did not know that it concerned you as well



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as Magnus Swaine. Will you take it home with you?"

Tom did not reach for the book.

"I don't mind your seeing it," he said. "You will not take me for a fool."

"No. But I felt—guilty——"

"Don't talk of that, sir. I am not afraid of your eyes. And Magnus is worth listening to. He has often blown the fog out of his grandson's brain."

Richard Dathan stood before the pier-glass in his room that evening, looking at himself by candle-light, for dusk had fallen without. And as he stood looking at himself questioningly, broodingly, a moth fluttered into the flame of the candle, and fell with singed wings.

"Rose Jessel!" thought the gazer into the mirror.

And then—

"Am I also a moth?"

And in the dusk of the coming night the great firs seemed to murmur some of dead Magnus's songs.

## CHAPTER XII

ABOUT that time Tom Swaine had a chance meeting with Rose Jessel.

The orchard grass was to be scythed, and the master of the Red Ghyll had shown a desire to learn the craft and share in the labour.

"But I don't want to break your scythe, Tom," he had said; "so you might go down to Ravenshoe to-day and get me a light one that I can swing."

And Tom went off dutifully enough, knowing from experience that a novice with a scythe is neither a graceful nor a very useful person.

Tom was coming out of the local ironmonger's with the guarded blade wrapped to the handle under one arm and a bundle of dahlia-sticks under the other, when a char-à-banc came clattering up to the door of the "Red Lion" Inn, next to the ironmonger's shop. Several such vehicles had already emptied a crowd of excursionists upon the footway, and Tom found himself wedged between the shop and a group of hatless girls in blouses with short sleeves. A big man bounced a young woman in blue down from the rim of a wheel, her squeak of mock terror being echoed by the youths and girls upon the pavement.

"Oh—my!"

"Jump me, boys, jump me!"

"Oh—my skirts!"

Tom had recognised the two as Rose Jessel and George Ramsden. There was a great deal of giggling and scrambling during the process of disembarkation, and Tom found himself hemmed in under one of the bay-windows of the inn.

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"Hallo, Tom!"

Rose had turned and caught sight of him, and there was a momentary flash of welcome in her eyes. Tom, cumbered by the scythe and the dahlia-sticks, pushed his way along the path, looking above the heads of the girls and men.

"Tom! Are you deaf?"

He glanced back at her, gave a curt nod, and passed on. Rose flushed an angry red; she was not a young madam to be ignored so easily, with George Ramsden standing grinning at her elbow.

"God, what a snub!" he said, with a laugh.

Rose's eyes gave out a shallow and spiteful glare.

"I'm not going to be treated like that!"

"Let sulky dogs lie."

"You wait, George. I'll make him lick my shoes."

Tom was in full retreat, when a girl walked backward from one of the brakes after that irresponsible fashion of her sex and impaled a muslin scarf on the point of one of the dahlia-sticks. The scarf had suffered by the time the girl had twisted herself free.

"Clumsy ——!"

She looked ready to spit at Tom. The other fluffy-haired, red-armed damsels laughed.

"Why don't you look where you're going? Fancy carrying a lot of beastly sticks about like that!"

The taunt was truly feminine, seeing that Tom was not the offending party.

"Sorry," he said; "but if you walk backwards you should have eyes in the back of your head."

"I like your cheek! Look here, Gus, the chap's torn my scarf, and gives me the lip over it!"

A dapper little counter-gentleman in a flannel suit and cheap white shoes tripped round to investigate. His sympathies appeared to rest with Tom.

"What's the damage? Eleven-three. Sign, please. It wasn't the gentleman's fault, Milly."

"You're a fool!" retorted the lady rudely; and then, with a glance at Tom, who was making for the

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open street: "I wasn't talking to you, young man. You might have the face to apologise."

"Very sorry," said Tom over a relentless shoulder.

"Rats!" added the lady, rearranging her scarf, and moving in the direction of the "Red Lion."

Tom had gone some fifty yards up Ravenshoe High Street when he heard the swish of skirts following fast on him, with the patter of feet.

"Tom!"

The man seemed obstinately deaf. Miss Jessel made an impatient little sucking sound with her tongue against her teeth. She prepared to force herself by sheer speed upon the retreating Tom's attention.

"Have the decency to stop when I speak to you."

Tom turned at last and looked her straight in the face. He could see that she was in an ugly temper, and all the evil in her that he had so often striven not to see seemed on the surface.

"What's the game, eh?"

"I am busy, that's all," he answered quietly.

"Not even time to remember your manners?"

Tom's face was as hard as iron.

"You need not worry about my manners, Rose."

She looked at him with a certain pique and angry conjecture.

"You fool! I suppose you're jealous."

Tom showed no temper.

"When are you going to be married?" he asked bluntly.

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Who told you I was going to be married?"

"No one."

She looked at Tom sharply and angrily, yet with the aggressive assurance of one conscious of something to be concealed.

"What's the matter with you?"

His eyes swept her face with an indescribable flash

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of feeling. There was pity in the look, and also something fiercer.

"There is nothing the matter with me," he said.

"Good Lord! then what's the meaning of all this mightiness? Have you gone up in the world on a pound a week?"

"I am older than I was, Rose, that is all."

His restraint and his grimness scared her a little. But a recrudescence of her anger helped her to smother the thoughts that made her afraid.

"I don't know what you mean, Tom Swaine, and I don't care."

He settled the dahlia-sticks under his arm and turned to go.

"Don't let the man make a fool of you, Rose," was all he said.

She swung round with a hot colour.

"Idiot! Mind your own business, and I'll mind mine"; but before she had walked ten yards she turned her head to see what Tom was doing. The man was already rounding the curve of the street, walking with his broad shoulders squared as though he regretted nothing.

The incident might have disturbed a sentimental man for days, but to Tom it meant no more than the hardening of his sanity with regard to Rose Jessel. His very first glimpse of her that morning had showed her to him cheerfully vulgar, a wench to be jumped down off the wheel of a brake, with a squeaking chorus of undisciplined youths celebrating the flick of a petticoat. The episode had jarred on Tom and thrown the critical part of him on the alert. He was not made for the cheap smartness of such a crowd, whereas Rose seemed but one of those coarse-faced, red-armed girls, with their raddled, sun-scorched faces and their crumpled white skirts that seemed to suggest too much lounging with men upon the sands of Ravensmouth. The thought of the fellow Ramsden had not troubled Tom in the least. He marched away up Ravenshoe High Street knowing that he had seen

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Rose as she was—a smart, vain, and vulgarly selfish young woman, with enough beauty to be dangerous to herself and to others. He found himself marvelling that he had never seen the girl in the mirror of truth many months ago. At seventeen—as a sly slip of womanhood—she had given promise of better things. But Rose had lacked discipline in her own home. The face of the child had hardened about the mouth and the eyes; the nostrils were too physically eager, the dress and figure too suggestive.

Up at the Red Ghyll June might have put pessimism out of any man's head. It was a green month where the farm was half a wilderness, and life had a complete and pagan joy. Every hedge was a great green wall, where honeysuckle, dog roses and brambles ran riot with one another. Every ditch was smothered in foliage. Familiar places took on an air of mystery and veiled themselves with luxuriant and shadowy greenness. The sense of distance increased when each wood drew within itself the suggestion of untrodden deeps. The world seemed in its youth, wild and primitive, virginal and unpossessed, glorying for one short space in its triumph over the monotonous and mechanical moods of modern man.

There was work to do—work amid the grass, with sweeping scythe and falling swathes. One small corner of the orchard had been cut, the yellow and shaven turf catching the bold sunlight in contrast to the nebulous green of the world around. A white cloth had been spread there when Tom came back from Ravenshoe, and a figure in grey lay propped against a scarlet cushion at the foot of an old pear tree. Nelly, the little housemaid, came out with the luncheon tray between her plump, pink forearms. There was to be a picnic under the pear tree before the work of the afternoon began.

Tom laid the new scythe down, cut the twine, and began to unwind the long hay band round the blade.

"I have brought you a light one. There is nothing

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like scything for blistering a beginner's fingers and giving him an ache in the back."

"We had better have lunch first, Tom. It is just ready."

"I left mine in the shed."

"Take it home again to-night, and join me here."

Tom glanced at the white tablecloth, the plates that shone in the sunlight, the red fruit, and the silver, the purple wine in the jug, the great pie, with crust the colour of birch leaves in autumn.

"It makes me feel like a boy," he said, smiling.

"Be a boy, then. It is perfect here amid the grass."

And they sat under the pear tree, with the breadth of the white cloth between them, and began their Arcadian meal.

That acre or more of orchard was a wonder world under the June sun. The tall grass was thick with weeds, but was the more beautiful for their luxuriance. Sheep's parsley grew about the hedges, spreading a white mist like the wreaths of vapour about an enchanted garden. Great docks were ready to bronze with seed. Sorrel shone in the sunlight, with moon-faced daisies—all a-dream. In some shallow places masses of eyebright dusted the grass with vivid blue. Buttercups still bloomed, yellow stars glimmering through the green. The flowering heads of the grass were very still—a myriad filmy finials unshaken by any wind. The foliage of the pear trees had lost the beautiful metallic green of spring, but the leaf domes were still fresh and vivid, uncoarsened as yet by the glare of later summer. The whole orchard was a study in light and shade. An impressionist might have painted great yellow whorls of glory palpitating amid shadows that had the tints of the emerald, the amethyst, and the sapphire.

Lunch was the laziest of meals, with the hum of unseen wings above the grass. Tom sat bolt upright with his plate between his knees, and was so little degenerated by the drowsiness of the day that he had

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pulled out his pipe and filled it while the master was still pondering over his pudding. There was the new scythe to be set up and sharpened. Tom rose, lit his pipe, and went to work.

"I'll hang the blade so that the heel drops," he said; "you won't push the point so often into the ground."

"It is curious how one's natural inclination seems to be to do things wrong!" said the man with his head on the red cushion.

"The easier a thing looks, sir, the more difficult it is."

"That's true."

"People don't seem to realise that a countryman has many tools to handle, and that he handles them well. I remember our having a gentleman staying down this way—a great, tall chap, who strutted about without a hat, and always looked at you as though he were going to ask you to feel his muscle. He wanted to come and work on the farm—it was the hay season—and we let him come. The way he looked down his nose at some of our men made me chuckle. 'What a lot of crabs your bumpkins are, Tom!' he said; 'I'll show them how to work.' One of the fellows heard him, and he passed the news round that the Londoner was out on show. We gave him a scythe and put a little chap—Will Grey—to set the pace. Yes; the men had a great deal of fun out of the gentleman that morning. He swore we had given him a blunt scythe, and Will Grey went along, shaving the grass down and looking half asleep. Then the Londoner gave up and changed his scythe for a rake. We put the wiriest of our old women against him, and she beat him right across the field."

Tom laughed over it as he fitted the blade to the pole and drove in the wedge. Then he fixed the handles, measuring the distance between them by the length of his forearm and hand. He made the scythe balance so that the heel showed an inclination to hug the ground. Then, driving the sharpened end of



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the pole into the ground, he picked up the stone and began to sharpen the blade.

"It always amuses me," he said, "the way the city dwellers are supposed to look down on Hodge. They send us the tools, but we use them, and we often have to put an edge on the tools before we can use them. I suppose there is some man in a manufactory who does nothing but fix the brass bands to chisel handles, or fixes swapping-hooks into the hafts. He does nothing else, and calls himself an intelligent mechanic. The man they call 'Hodge' has to do fifty different things. He can turn his hand to most things on the land. I know plenty of country fellows who would make the best mechanic look an ignorant fool."

"So far as I can see," said the dreamer under the pear tree, "Hodge does not exist."

"He only exists, sir, for those who have not the faintest notion what he has to know and to do. Get at the man, and Hodge disappears."

The sharp, stinging strokes of the stone resounded through the orchard. \* Once again the trick looked so easy, with the facile flick of the stone swung to and fro from the man's wrist. Richard Dathan got up and watched.

"I ought to be able to sharpen my own scythe," he said.

"Try, sir."

Tom showed him how to hold the scythe, both for heel and point work, and how to rub with the stone. Slow, clumsy, grinding strokes were all that the novice could produce. Often the stone struck the edge of the blade, which wobbled to and fro, as though shrinking under the clumsy caresses.

"Well, I'm blessed! What a bungler I am, to be sure!"

Tom was quite solemn over it. He had none of that cheapness of mind that cackles over the clumsiness of a beginner.

"Let your wrist go loosely," he said; "a lot of it is play from the wrist."

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"I think that's enough, Tom. I shall take all the edge off you have put on."

It was time to get to work, and Tom pulled off his jacket, knocked his pipe out, and rolled up his sleeves. The strong, well-proportioned figure showed up, with the loose shirt open at the throat, the leather belt about the waist, and the arms showing well above the elbows. One had a glimpse of the depth of the man's chest and the muscles about the base of the bronzed neck.

Richard Dathan rolled up his sleeves, but did not open his shirt. He turned down the brim of his white sun-hat and picked up the scythe.

"Where shall I begin, Tom?"

Tom looked gravely at a bank of nettles and sheep's parsley towering along the hedge. Such stuff was easier to mow than the thicker yet more elusive grass.

"Try there, sir. Don't stoop too much. Just swing the thing from the shoulders, and keep the heel down. Don't slash, and mind the point."

He took his own scythe from the tree where he had hung it and went to work, leaving the Australian to attempt his own salvation. The shrill, soft snore of the steel blade soon sounded through the grass. The swathe fell with beautiful precision. The scythe, swinging to and fro, caught the sunlight as the tall grass sank and fell.

Quite a different song came from the bank of nettles. A few crackling strokes, and then silence; yet more strokes, and again silence, broken by the splitting of the nettle stems under the mower's feet.

Tom finished a swathe and turned to watch. At that identical moment Richard Dathan drove the point of the scythe some inches into the turf.

"The thing seems all point, Tom. Come and show me again."

Tom crossed over.

"Let me see you try."

The very first stroke buried the point once more

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in the ground. Richard Dathan turned a hot face to his companion. The humour of the thing was such that they both burst out laughing.

"How utterly absurd!"

"Nothing of the kind, sir. There are plenty of things you can do that I should look a fool at."

"Well, I look a fool at this, anyhow!"

Tom took the scythe and brought the nettles down in long swathes.

"Now try again."

The master of the Red Ghyll resumed the experiment, Tom standing close on the right of him, watching. At the beginning of one sweep Tom reached out suddenly, caught the other's wrists, and held them.

"Just wait, sir, like that."

The other turned a flushed face to Tom's. His eyes lit up with laughter, and with something more subtle.

"I just want you to look how the scythe is hanging."

"Yes, Tom."

"The heel's a foot off the ground, see, and the point will jam in the turf. You mustn't slash, sir. Keep the heel down and swing."

Tom still had hold of the other's wrists, and they stood thus for a moment, looking into each other's eyes.

Tom let go.

"Now try again."

"How's that?"

"Better. Don't try too much at a time. You'll tire yourself and mow wild. Twenty good strokes and then a rest."

And Tom went back to his own scythe.

So the afternoon went with the steady fall of the long grass, till the master hung his scythe in a tree, showed his blistered hands to Tom, and went in to tell Mrs. Marvin to send tea out to them in the orchard. The sun neared the hills as they sat under the pear tree, with the teapot between them, and the grass

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shining in the sunlight like a maze of golden wires. The long swathes were already sending up their fragrance, and the shadows lengthened under the apple trees.

The Australian did not take his scythe again, but wandered away lazily towards the woods. The afternoon's work had brought that pleasant languor—a languor that is of the body alone, while the mind soars above the satiated flesh. The wanderer felt part of the summer day, luminous, meditative, yet conscious of the murmur of life in the still air. The grass seemed to thrill at times with slow, sinuous undulations that were hardly visible. The breath of June was like the sweet, tired breath of a passionate lover.

Something seemed to have happened that day—a thing subtle and strange, that had not yet risen to the surface of the conscious self. Wandering in the woods, the mower felt that vague and indescribable disquietude that fills the mind before the realisation of some new emotion. The colours of the earth seemed richer, the odour of the pines more full and fragrant. The seed that fell from the grass in the fields scattered and showered like luminous dust in the sunlight. The green deeps were full of a mysterious expectancy. It seemed a world for some god of the world's dawn to walk in—a god from Ida's pines, leaving a whorl of light where'er he went.

The sunlight was pouring in long slants across the grass when the wanderer in the woods and fields came back to the upland orchard. The sorrel glowed amid the green like fire, and the white daisies carved the aureoles of a thousand elvish saints. Tom was still at work, and the song of the scythe played through the evening haze where the quivering grass and the sunlight met. He had thrown his hat aside and worked bareheaded, throat, face and arms catching a tawny radiance under the foliage of the trees.

The wanderer, sweeping through the long grass, stood still suddenly, with an inward musing look of the eyes, watching the man who swung the scythe. A

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shadow passed over the rather swarthy face. There was a deepened tint as of rising blood driven upwards by some rush of emotion. Tom had mown a great semi-lune of sward. "Long swathes lay behind him, and his eyes seemed to follow the sweep of the scythe. The figure in grey passed on undiscovered, and, circling so as to avoid Tom, disappeared amid the shadows of the garden.

What swift snake had glided through the grass that day and poisoned the blood of one who had walked blindly, looking towards the clouds? Why should a sudden fever of self-shame, of humiliated discontent, pour into a life that had promised so much passionless repose? Why should a species of mute and prophetic panic seize on the heart of such a summer day?

Yet someone lay long awake that night, restless, distraught, oppressed by the shadow of some vague mischance. Perhaps Nature had turned upon the renegade and discovered with satirical sympathy the things that may befall those who are insolent enough to play a problem to the end. Life can be like an unknown drug: it may fire the cells or stifle them. The tentative testing of such a liquor may prove disastrous so far as the experimenter is concerned.

## CHAPTER XIII

"BE careful how you handle that chisel, sir; it's as sharp as a razor."

They had turned one of the old farm buildings into a carpenter's shop, a toolshed, a smithy, and a potting shed combined. A joiner's bench had been built under an improvised window, and tool racks fitted along the walls. The floor was littered with sawdust and shavings, paint pots, the bark from chestnut poles, old boxes, and bits of oak.

Rain had been falling all day, the heavy down-rush of a June sky, dark almost to purple above the green earth. Spouts plashed and gurgled; the rattle on roof and leaves was ceaseless, rhythmic, somnolent. A veil covered the landscape. There was no wind to scatter the moisture in showers from the drooping boughs.

It was a day for work under cover, and Tom, with a long plank laid across two boxes, was ripping battens out of it with a powerful saw. Where the ingenious are concerned there is no necessity for idleness or even boredom. Glazier, painter, carpenter, metal worker—a man may be all these in the country to his own profit both in pocket and in brains. An assortment of packing cases, a smoothing plane, a saw, two chisels, a gimlet, and a few minor necessities will set your enthusiast manufacturing all manner of articles, from ottomans and chicken coops to apple trays and corner cupboards.

Richard Dathan was splitting the wood from a sugar-box into bars for chicken coops, using an inch chisel for the job, and paring off the splinters and the rough edges with the same tool. A chisel is a weapon

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that the amateur is apt to treat with too much familiarity, often working with the happy thoughtlessness of a servant carving a loaf in the direction of her hand. Tom Swaine cast more than one uneasy glance at the operator. The methods were so crude and strenuous that a slit artery in the wrist seemed no unlikely occurrence.

"Why not fix the wood in the vice and use both hands?"

"I'm getting on all right, Tom."

"Deal's treacherous stuff."

"I'll be careful. Don't you worry."

Tom's saw began ripping at the plank again, the long, snoring strokes scattering sawdust like puffs of pollen blown from a tree. A couple of swallows were twittering on the rafters overhead, while the rain came down ceaselessly upon the tiles.

"Hallo——!"

The amateur at the back had dropped the chisel and was staring at his left wrist.

"Cut yourself?"

There was no need for the question, for blood was running fast enough to drip on to the shavings and stain them red. Tom left the saw standing in the seam and reached the bench in three strides.

The gash was a goodly one, the blood-mark of a bungler. Tom forced sleeve and cuff high up the white forearm, and, getting a grip above the cut, tried by compression to stop the flow.

"Hurting you?"

"No. You haven't said, 'I told you so!'"

"That wouldn't mend matters. Where's your handkerchief?"

Richard Dathan dipped into a breast coat pocket, and between them they contrived to fold the thing into a temporary bandage.

"Hold your wrist while I bind it up; tight as you can, sir."

"How will that do?"

Tom set to work drawing the folds firmly and

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knotting the ends off with all his strength. He had hardly finished before red blots showed through, staining the cambric.

"You'll have to have the doctor up."

For the first time Tom saw the master of the Red Ghyll wince. He glanced up sharply into his face, and was struck by the scared expression of the eyes.

"It's a mere nothing."

"Is it? You've touched an artery by the look of it."

"I don't want a doctor."

"That's nonsense, sir."

"It will stop in a few minutes."

"I don't know about that. I'll send down to Ravenshoe for Emmery."

They looked each other in the eyes, but Tom was the master for the moment.

"Sit down there and keep your hand up. I'll slip across and tell the girl to run down to Ravenshoe at once."

Tom went out into the rain, and, crossing what had been the farmyard, entered the house by the back door. The little maidservant was scrubbing the shelves in the dairy, while in the kitchen Mrs. Marvin reposed in her basket-chair with a handkerchief over her face.

"Put on your shoes and hat, Nellie, and run down to Ravenshoe for Dr. Emmery. Mr. Dathan has cut his wrist."

The girl, who had a tacit admiration for brown-faced Tom, obeyed him with the meekness of a subservient sister.

"You'd better take a cloak, Nellie. Tell the doctor to come up here at once. Where's Mrs. Marvin?"

"In the kitchen," said the girl as she disappeared up the back stairs to her room.

Mrs. Marvin woke with a jump.

"Good gracious, Mr. Swaine, you did just startle me!"

"Get some old linen, Mrs. Marvin, will you? The



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master's cut his wrist badly. I've sent Nellie down for the doctor."

Mrs. Marvin, likewise, had a motherly and affectionate interest in Tom Swaine. She bustled round, rummaged out a rag-bag, and soon had a pile of old linen on the table.

"I can't abide the sight of blood," she chattered, tearing the stuff into long strips; "it always makes me faint and all-overish. How did it come about? Gracious! Why couldn't he leave the thing alone? Hope the wound won't fester. Tell the master I'd run out to him, Mr. Swaine, but that I'm such a poor fly thing when there's blood about."

Tom took the linen under his coat and made a dash across the yard for the carpentering shed.

"Hallo, sir!"

He tossed the bandages on to the bench and caught Richard Dathan round the shoulders.

"I believe I'm going to faint, Tom."

His master's face had that indescribable ashy look, that far-away, blind expression about the eyes, that betrays a flagging heart.

"Don't let——"

His whole weight fell suddenly upon Tom. He had fainted.

Tom took his master in his arms and carried him across the yard, with the rain beating in his face, and into the kitchen, where Mrs. Marvin was replacing the rags and linen in her bag.

"My gracious!"

"It's all right," said Tom curtly, as though he suspected the old lady of hysterical propensities; "he's only fainted. I'll carry him upstairs. Open the door, will you, and get some brandy?"

Mrs. Marvin opened the door and Tom climbed the stairs with the master of the Red Ghyll in his arms. He carried him into the green bedroom with the black beams and the tall pier-glass reflecting the colours from its corner. Mrs. Marvin, who had followed with a spirit decanter, twitched the red cover-

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let from the bed. Tom laid Richard Dathan down and slipped a pillow under his head.

Then Tom and Mrs. Marvin looked at each other.

"Better undress him, had we?" asked the old lady.

Tom unfastened his master's collar, loosened his tie, and began to unbutton his soft-fronted shirt. Richard Dathan's eyes opened suddenly. He glanced at the two faces looking down at him and felt Tom's hand at his breast.

"What's this? I'm all right now."

He pushed Tom's arm aside and sat up with a confused and angry look, his face flushing like the face of a girl. There was something akin to fierceness in the glance he shot at Tom.

"We thought you'd better be up here, sir."

"Have some brandy, Mr. Dathan, sir, do."

The master of the Red Ghyll sat on the edge of the bed and rebuttoned his shirt. He had gone very white again. The blood was oozing from the handkerchief over the wounded wrist.

"Give me the glass, Mrs. Marvin. You need not send for the doctor."

His hand shook as he drank.

"We've sent already, sir."

"What abominable nonsense, all this fuss about a small cut! The man will think me a mollicoddle. Send down and tell him he need not bother."

Tom stood his ground.

"It's worse than you think, sir. The wound will need stitching, by the look of it."

"I hope he'll thank you for wasting his time. Get me another handkerchief out of that drawer."

An hour passed before Emmery, of Ravenshoe, drove down the "spruce" avenue in his gig, and the white gate clanged to behind him as he came down the garden path. The girl Nell had given a very vivid version of the mishap.

"I'm afraid they've dragged you down here to look at a mere scratch."

"Indeed!" And the general practitioner smiled,

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it being his "cross" in life to accept the innumerable petty perversities of his profession with buxom serenity. "Supposing we have a look. Some hot water, please, and a basin. You seem to have lost a fair amount of blood."

Richard Dathan's face had a tense, strained look. He had been sitting in an arm-chair by his bedroom window, watching the clouds break in the west—great fissures of gold like lava pouring from the flank of a mountain. The rain had ceased, but there was still the drip of the rain from the trees.

"You call that a mere scratch, eh?"

Emmery had taken off the soaked bandages, while the master of the Red Ghyll held his hand over the basin. Blood was still flowing pretty briskly from the wound.

"Nothing more than a skin cut, is it?"

"My dear fellow, skin cut or not, you have wounded the artery. See this?"

He gripped the arm below the shoulder, pressing the brachial artery against the bone with his fingers. The blood flow from the wrist ceased almost immediately.

"See, I shall have to hurt you a little, I'm afraid. Hallo, the old lady has fled! Have you anyone about the house with nerve and common sense?"

"There is Tom Swaine. You won't want me to undress?"

"Just the fellow! Oh, no, I only want the sleeve rolled up. I'll call the man up. He can compress the artery for me."

Tom was summoned forthwith, to be an interested witness of the surgeon's dexterity and delicacy of touch. The cut artery was ligatured, the wound washed and stitched, the wrist swathed in antiseptic dressings. A big silk handkerchief provided an efficient sling.

Richard Dathan had suffered in silence, without so much as a sharp indrawing of the breath through closed teeth. Yet Tom, who had had a view of the

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reflection of his master's face in the mirror, had been struck by the restless, watchful expression of the eyes, the look of one preparing to bear some paroxysms of pain. Tom had merely seen the physical side of suffering, and the dread that had brought that strained stare into the master of the Red Ghyll's eyes had been spiritual, and not physical.

Tom had gone and Emmery was pulling on his gloves.

"I suppose I shall be all right in a few days?"

"I give you a fortnight, if the wound heals as it should."

"Will there be any scar?"

"Nothing to speak of. The cut is clean and in the same line as the folds of the skin."

He held out a hand.

"You had better keep quiet. Let Swaine act as male nurse. You will want someone to help you dress."

Richard Dathan's hand rested limply in the doctor's.

"Thanks. I shall be able to manage," he said curtly.

When Emmery had gone he sat at the open window, leaning back in his chair and watching the melting of the cloud-wrack in the west. The garden was full of the moist fragrance of a rain-drenched June. The fields shone like gold, the wet trees glimmered.

"Good night, sir."

Tom was standing under the window. Richard Dathan rose from his chair and looked out.

"Is there anything more I can do for you, sir?"

"Thanks, Tom, no."

"It's rather awkward being one-handed. Couldn't I help you with your clothes?"

"I can manage quite well, Tom, thanks."

"I'll come down first thing in the morning. Good night."

"Good night." And he sank back in his chair.

## CHAPTER XIV

IN a certain pious tract it is told how a man slipped on a piece of orange peel in the street, broke his leg, and was carried to a hospital, to be "saved" there by the spiritual ministrations of his neighbour in the adjoining bed. He "slid into salvation," as the tract has it, a blessed coincidence that had been foreordained by the Mind that made the stars.

Owing to a somewhat similar coincidence, the master of the Red Ghyll had slipped into a very peculiar dilemma, a dilemma that brought him sleepless nights and infinite distraction in the matter of emotions. He found himself poised on the edge of a psychical precipice. So much depended upon that little red wound over the wrist—whether it should heal with all innocence, or whether inflammatory mischief should set in. All the precautions of surgery were against such a complication; it was but a faint and theoretical possibility. But where there is so much as a chink of doubt, the mind that is in a fever will look through that chink and behold disaster waiting to plunge the world into chaos.

Tom Swaine and Mrs. Marvin had to be kept at a distance. They were so solicitous, so eager to be of use. The housekeeper had insisted that Mr. Dathan could not attack buttons and such-like accessories with one hand, and here was Tom Swaine to act as a valet. The wounded one was as obstinate in refusing to be ministered to. "So much fuss about a scratch of the skin! It was preposterous! He could manage perfectly well himself."

The news had been transmitted casually to Mrs. Hermon, and the lady's pity had taken colour in a

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glorious galaxy of roses. The rough luggage cart clattered down from "The Mount" to the Red Ghyll, the tangible witnesses of Mrs. Portia's favour being the roses aforesaid, a basketful of strawberries, three novels, and a number of magazines.

Mrs. Hermon appeared in person not long after the advent of the luggage cart. The invalid was lounging in a wicker chair under the yew tree in the south-west corner of the garden, with one of the novels in his lap and a plate of strawberries at his elbow. The ingratitude of human nature might have been gauged by the "aside" that escaped Mr. Dathan's lips when Mrs. Hermon entered the white gate.

The outward courtesies, however, were exceedingly chaste and gracious. Mrs. Hermon's pomposity soared into the empyrean of matronly sympathy and concern.

"So excessively troublesome! To be condemned to that inactivity, so trying to an energetic temperament! Playing with edged tools! You must strive to console yourself with lit-er-a-ture."

Mrs. Hermon pronounced every syllable with distinctness. The etiquette of diction was rigidly respected. Words were not permitted to crowd and push.

The lady took unto herself a chair that the maid brought from the house.

"I do not know whether you have read the books—or, rather, works of fiction—I sent you? There is a distinction, is there not? Of course, they are light and ephemeral, but quite diverting. The novel of to-day is a butterfly production. I was discussing lit-er-a-ture with Mark Maelstrom last summer; he was staying in one of my cottages. 'My dear madam,' he said, 'we are moths, mere moths, we moderns. We fly into the flame of notoriety and expire.' The simile seems most apposite."

Mrs. Hermon had at least one excellence—that of irresponsible and self-satisfied loquacity. A listener

who had once resigned himself to boredom had only to nod like a porcelain mandarin.

"I hope you admired my roses?"

"You are more than bountiful."

Mrs. Hermon lifted vivacious spectacles towards the sunlight.

"Dear old Sir John Janaway is a rival of mine in roses. I matched a Caroline Testout against a Ferdinand Jamin of his, and he had to confess me victorious. Probably you noticed some of my Gloires. They are indeed glorious. Might we not call them crystallised sunshine?"

It was Mrs. Hermon's desire to divert and amuse, to display a charming *esprit de vie*, and to prove that even a middle-aged woman can fascinate. She beamed upon Richard Dathan, swayed to and fro in her chair with gracious rigidity, and was confidentially kind to the point of pathos.

"Dr. Emmery declared to me that you were the personification of pluck."

"What nonsense! The thing is hardly worth taking seriously."

"You men are so stoical, you will never admit the need of pity."

"On the contrary, I believe most of us are perfectly hopeless at bearing pain. As for pity——"

Mrs. Hermon gave a ridiculous flirt of the head.

"Be careful, sir, be careful."

"So much depends upon the personality of the friend who offers us pity."

The lady considered the apothegm with her head tilted a little to one side. The remark might have a double meaning. She embraced the warmer and more suggestive of the two.

"May I take that as a compliment?"

"Do, by all means."

And Mrs. Hermon came near stroking the bandaged hand that rested on the arm of the basket-chair.

As white light is split into the colours of the spectrum by passing through a prism, so life is broken

into its diverse shades by the individual mind. The mere eye may behold nothing more than the grey stretch of the sea, whereas before the imagination come Viking ships and great Spanish caracks, visions of treasure lying deep amid dead men's bones, and all the infinite anguish of a thousand storms. To the ego every phenomenon has a personal and intimate significance. Many a tragedy works itself to the last utterance without the world hearing aught thereof. For our altruism is often like a glass of old wine drunk at the end of a meal. It adds to the creature's comfort, flushes the heart momentarily with generous emotions, which discreetly disappear before a cheque-book can be handled on the morrow.

Many a man who has been bitten by a dog frightens himself into imagining that he feels the prophetic spasm of the throat and that dread of water which is said to go with the disease. Dr. Emmery had dressed the master of the Red Ghyll's wounded wrist that morning, and had confessed that the edges of the wound looked more inflamed than he should have expected.

"No pain or stiffness in the armpit?" he had asked.

"No, none at all."

"I expect the place will be quiet enough in a day or two, and I shall be able to relieve you of the stitches."

But where there is the smallest element of danger, and the issues at stake are peculiarly vital to the individual, feverish self-introspection may go far towards turning the hypothetical into the real. Some such process developed itself in the Australian's mind after Mrs. Hermon had taken her departure. He was vividly anxious that this small thing should not grow more complex, and so lead to complexities that might bring him to confusion. And this simple first cause, having so much importance attached to its existence, seemed to swell with self-conscious pride, and to boast of the potentialities contained within its future. The



wound at the wrist began to tingle and twinge as though there were poison in it. The whole limb felt hot. A vague suggestion of pain developed in the armpit. The sufferer found himself shivering with trickles of cold panic quivering down his spine. The phenomena were largely psychical, but self-analysis only frightens the individual further when he has lost his mental poise.

Richard Dathan went up to his room, removed the dressings, and looked at the wound. Around it was that red areola paling away into the skin. He could feel the arteries throbbing from the elbow to the very tips of the fingers. And since there was nothing else to do, he replaced the dressing, using his teeth to help his right hand in the fastening of the bandage.

The house seemed hot and oppressive, and he wandered out over the fields towards the pine-woods, where the brown mast, the bracken, and the young heather wove a gorgeous carpet for the sun to play upon. But the same restlessness, the same paralyzing panic, followed the wanderer into the solemn aisles of the pine-woods. The desire for solitude became a dread of the same. The whispering silences of the trees were eerie and full of prophetic reticence. The master of the Red Ghyll turned back again towards contact with the human elements of life. It would be a relief to hear the sound of voices, to see the lamps lit when the dusk fell, to feel that nearness to one's fellows that dispels the sense of night and nothingness.

In the orchard Tom was raking the grass, and the scent of it made the air fragrant. He was drawing the swathes into cocks for the night when Richard Dathan came across the home pastures from the pine-woods.\* The orchard was full of the slanting light of the dying day, great beams of gold striking on the tree-trunks and the grass, and an amber haze covering the tops of the distant hills. Foxgloves purpled the hedges, and the wild briars were in bloom.

The vision of that orchard with its greens and

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golds, and the strong, brown-skinned man raking the hay, seemed to reveal the symbolism of some great picture—green June, warm, sensuous, and inevitable. The glamour of flowers; the setting of the young fruit upon the trees—here was life, strong, satisfying, and elemental—life in which the joy of being might smother all problems.

Decision flashed into the master of the Red Ghyll's mind with that sudden forcefulness that rends the obscurity of doubt as lightning rends the night sky. The future stood clear and attainable in the momentary glare. The crisis had come, to be met at last with the confession of defeat.

Tom glanced up as he pushed the hay before him with his rake.

"How is the wrist, sir, to-night?"

"The scratch has nearly healed. It is quite ridiculous that such a fuss should have been made about it. By the way, Tom, what time is the fast morning train for town?"

"Ten-twenty, sir."

"I have to go up to town to-morrow—shopping and business. You might have the pony-trap ready. I shall have some luggage, as I may stay several days."

"About half-past nine will do."

"That will give me plenty of time. And, Tom, I suppose Saunders is coming with the machine to cut the two fields next week?"

"I'll see that he does, sir. We shall get it done while you are away."

"Mrs. Marvin need not forward any letters. It will not be worth while."

The master of the Red Ghyll passed on, leaving Tom raking the last swathes together, utterly innocent in his ignorance of the emotions that had passed so close to him.

## CHAPTER XV

A CLERK entered Mr. Cumberledge's inner room at his offices in Lincoln's Inn Fields and laid a gentleman's visiting-card on the lawyer's desk.

"Who is it, Cave? Ah, yes; show him in at once. And, Cave, have that affidavit and those exhibits posted off to Oxford at once."

"I will see to it, sir."

Mr. Cumberledge swept a litter of papers aside with his hand, and leant back in his chair, with his eyes fixed upon the door by which the clerk had entered. Like Pope, Mr. Cumberledge had a fine head on a crippled body—a head whose very massiveness conveyed the impression that its own weight had sunk it between the rounded shoulders. The face and forehead, almost Napoleonic in their contours, carried an expression of imperturbable watchfulness. A pure white forelock added to the intense individuality of the man's whole atmosphere.

"Come in, come in. Well, and how is everything?"

He had risen to meet his client, the fine poise of his manner, his natural courtliness, free from all affectation, making the physical deformity a mere insignificant detail to be ignored.

"You see, I still need you as much as ever."

"Sit down. An accident?" and he glanced at the arm in the silk sling. "One moment; we are very secretive in these climes."

He went to the door, opened it, and glanced down the passage that sealed his sanctum from the outer world.

"Cave."

The clerk reappeared at the glass-panelled office-door.

"See that I am not disturbed."

"Yes, sir." And they heard the locking of the door.

Mr. Cumberledge turned to his client with a smile softening his eyes and mouth. His face carried the conviction of his probity, and suggested a largeness of heart and a profundity of wisdom that passed far beyond the mere lifeless limits of the law.

"Well, have things gone a little roughly? You will find that arm-chair there comfortable."

He had that rare ease of manner that saves self-conscious people from themselves.

"Do you remember what you said to me not so many months ago?"

"I say so many things."

"That in spite of this experiment of mine you told me that you would always realise that you were acting for a woman."

Mr. Cumberledge looked at his client with a glint of humour in his eyes.

"If I said that, I was not far from being a wise man."

"And something of a prophet also."

"Ah!"

"The experiment has failed. I have been to see Habershorne this morning. You can refer to me again as 'she.'"

"Completely?"

"No, only on the side of sentiment."

The lawyer said nothing for a moment. He leant back in his chair, revolving a gold pencil-case between his fingers.

"Not a betrayal, I hope?"

"No."

"I was afraid perhaps——" And he glanced at the arm.

"Yes, a cut wrist. It was a narrow escape for

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me. I confess I had a scare. But it is not that alone that has determined me in changing everything."

Mr. Cumberledge glanced at her with keen, intent eyes.

"What, again?"

"Yes."

"Of your own free-will?"

"Yes."

"My dear girl!"

"Now you see how wise you were to condemn me irrevocably as nothing more than a woman."

They looked at each other with a species of mutual interest, as though the personality of each had a charm and a fascination for the other.

"Well?"

"Do you want me to go into the psychology of the thing?"

"Perhaps I can construct it for myself."

"Possibly you can."

"And the result thereof?"

"Is that I am unstable—well, as life. I am going to revert to the original type."

"A case of emotional atavism, eh?"

"Call it what you please."

Mr. Cumberledge still twisted the pencil-case to and fro between his fingers. His face wore an expression of sympathetic calm that was impressive and invigorating.

"Well?"

"Will you help me again? I want advice."

He rose suddenly, pushed back his chair, and walking round the desk, stood with his back to the solitary window of the room, a window that opened upon a discreetly deaf and blind brick wall.

"My dear girl, do you remember what I told you many months ago? When your father"—and he paused a moment as though communing with the past—"when your father did for me what no other mortal on earth would have done, I locked that bond

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of friendship in the strong-box of my memory. I am not a man given to the making of idle promises."

She looked up at him with a grateful flash of the eyes.

"Do you know what I value most in you?" she asked.

"No?"

"Your habit of taking people seriously, and of treating them as sane beings, not as aberrations. There is so much cynicism and flippancy——"

"Wait. People who know life, the real life, are never sworn cynics. Life is just like Nature. We see many superficial forms and colours, but the mystery beneath the forms and phases is largely beyond our ken. The best that we men can do is to be humble, and to try to understand."

She remained silent awhile, with her head bowed slightly over her bosom.

"I will explain everything to you."

"And I shall respect it."

"I know. It is not merely a question of law with you. But you are busy now?"

"A little." And he smiled at her.

"I have taken the first step along the edge of a precipice."

Mr. Cumberledge pulled out his watch.

"Where is your luggage? Have you any?"

"I left it at the station."

"Very well. The best thing I can suggest is that you come and stay with me up at Hampstead. We can talk over everything there in privacy, and at our leisure. There is only my sister, and she, poor soul! is conveniently afflicted. There, out of my own mouth I am condemning myself! My sister is blind, as you remember."

She looked up at him, and drew a deep breath of gratitude and relief.

"You are very good to me."

"Call it friendship."

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"I think you understand what I suffered in the past—all about Spencer?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Then I may come?"

"I will send a telegram at once to my sister."

"You do not know how much I owe you."

When she had gone, Mr. Cumberledge sat motionless in his chair for some minutes.

"And they say that modern life is stale and commonplace," he reflected. "How can anything be mathematically exact and a matter of routine when there are women in the world?"

## CHAPTER XVI

THE Australian had called at Habershone's house in Wimpole Street within an hour of arriving in town, and having been fortunate enough to find the doctor in, she had explained her predicament, and asked him to look at the wounded wrist. Habershone, sympathetic, yet a little amused, had reassured her with regard to possible complications.

"The wound is healing perfectly," he had said. "You have been worrying yourself into a fever. Come back in two days, and I will take the stitches out for you."

Habershone was to hear of the more intimate changes two days later when he bent over the wrist, holding forceps and scissors for removing the stitches. His patient had completely recovered her poise. She rested her hand on the back of a chair, her eyes fixed upon the red scar crossing the wrist."

"That was a narrow escape for me."

His grave eyes glanced up into her face.

"You may remember that I warned you against possible accidents."

She watched him snip one of the stitches and draw it out with the forceps.

"Yes, I remember. And this little episode has taught me how precarious a hold we have over our own fates. I may say that it has taught me a lesson."

"There are so many possible mischances in life," he answered, "that it seems hardly wise for anyone to stand wilfully on the edge of a precipice."

"Five minutes' unconsciousness nearly betrayed me. The feeling of pain returns when I think of it. I realise now the value of the advice you gave me."



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"And the life itself—has it been a success?"

"So much a success that I have been reconverted. The moral is so obvious that it might make you smile."

"Well, what is it?"

"That I might just as well live down there as a woman as a man."

"You seem to have risked a good deal to discover that."

"How true! Yet, when I tell you that I am going to revert to the original type, you will understand that I want to reconstruct my womanliness."

He drew out the last stitch, and then looked up at her keenly.

"Surely you will find it——"

"Difficult?"

She caught him up with a light laugh.

"You may remember that I told you I had a sister in Australia?"

"Yes."

"I am sailing for Australia to bring her back to England. And, of course, I shall die out there, and she will return."

Habershone nodded with the air of a man who was not to be surprised by any mad freak he might discover in a woman.

"I have been taught a lesson," she continued, "and I shall not risk having it repeated. It is with regard to the reconstruction of my womanliness, as we may call it, that I want to ask your advice."

"Well, tell me."

She passed a finger over her upper lip and smiled. Habershone understood.

"The electric needle will do that," he said.

"And my hair? I want it longer. It used to be down to my waist."

Habershone turned, laid the forceps and the scissors on the mantelpiece, and then looked round at her with a smile hovering under the grey moustache.

"To be frank with you," he said, "I think these

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matters would be better in other hands. There are persons whom we call 'beauty specialists.' "

She glanced up at him sharply, but he was serenely serious.

"No, I am quite in earnest. My attitude may seem unprofessional, but I can recommend you a woman whose services have been invaluable in many cases. And, after all, yours is the simplest of the simple. Pardon me, but I should imagine that you would make a handsome woman."

She blushed hotly, and then laughed at herself to cover the blush.

"If you are going to be satirical——"

"I am nothing of the kind. The lady I refer to is a Frenchwoman, and what she does not know about the physical side of a woman's charm is not worth knowing. I can assure you that she is no charlatan. But, of course, you will not go to her——?"

"In these clothes! Certainly not. They go with me to Australia first. My sister will be the person to consult your specialist."

"I see."

"Will you give me the lady's name?"

Habershon went to his desk, drew out a file of cards, and, after looking through them, found the one he needed.

MADAME DURAC,  
101, CRAIGMILLAR STREET,  
W.

"You had better keep it," he said. "I may explain that Madame has a 'home' of her own, where patients are received and treated. Her fees are fairly heavy."

"That does not matter"; and she looked at him with a flash of humour. "I suppose your experience has taught you that we women are willing to pay for that most priceless possession—charm of sex."

"And yet you were sacrificing it," he retorted.

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"Well, I am a woman. And Madame is to be trusted? Of course, she will know nothing of all this."

"If she were untrustworthy, her connection would never have become what it is. Tact and integrity are part of her stock-in-trade."

She held out her hand.

"Thank you, ever so much. And now it will be good-bye to Mr. Richard Dathan."

He bowed to her impressively.

"Perhaps I may be given an introduction to your sister?"

"Of course. I hope you will like one another."

## CHAPTER XVII

MR. CUMBERLEDGE'S house at Hampstead had that breadth of forehead and that grave magnanimity of manner that distinguished its master from the meaner men of his profession. Mr. Cumberledge was a romanticist—a man whose mind was full of Italian landscapes and books sheathed in cloth of gold. The keen, masterful man of affairs became the æsthetician, the thinker, the connoisseur in his own home. He had one of those large and generous natures that seem to have time to experience everything, and to gather great harvests into the garner of the mind. Brief certainly was his leisure when compared with his working day—a kind of sunset rich with colour and the outlines of lonely hills, or an hour's moonlight amid the cypress-groves of the South.

Mr. Cumberledge dined at eight. His guest had but a fleeting glance at him in the drawing-room before the great gong thundered through the house. Miss Cumberledge went in to dinner on her brother's arm—a frail, spiritual woman, with eyes that seemed to see and understand, and a face pathetic with a kind of yearning for things remembered in the morning haze of youth.

The guest found something great in the man's quiet and unostentatious tenderness towards his sister. Even the trifling courtesies of the table were transfigured by forethought into acts of chivalry—acts that few men would trouble to render after the strain of a long day's work. John Cumberledge had unusual powers of sympathy, self-renunciation, and tolerant restraint. He was no fussing, snapping, and aggressive "house-master"—the man who carries all

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his business irritations home in his hand-bag, and scatters them broadcast, while his womenfolk shiver, and attempt to sympathise.

At the dinner-table the Australian had a yet more intimate insight into the character of the man who had been her father's friend. Miss Bessy Cumberland would sit with her sightless eyes turned to that dark space whence her brother's voice came, and where she imagined his face to be. He was a clever conversationalist even at his own table with no one to applaud, and the reason thereof appeared to be that he talked for the amusement of his sister, and not for the edification of his own complacency. His eyes became her eyes, and through his eyes she looked out upon life, a panorama of words visualising life for her, like the vivid pages of a book.

A well-known artist had been giving a private view to friends of some of his year's pictures, and the lawyer had spent half an hour at the studio on his way home from Lincoln's Inn.

"I imagine you only remember Whitaker's early style, Bessy?"

"The orange and red exuberance of youth!" And her face became bright with inward vision.

"It is quite a man's art now, not mere allegory or passionate dreams. Have you seen any of Whitaker's work, Dathan?"

"Only in photographs."

"Mere ghosts, without mortal glory! Shall I try to give you a glimpse of one of the latest, Bessy?"

"Please."

"June twilight, with no wind moving. The broad steep of a forest valley rushing upwards like a black sea towards the sunset, and breaking in golden foam against the pine-woods on the skyline. In the middle distance the sheen of water—a forest mere, and in the midst thereof a castle of many towers, with mists weaving magic about its battlements. Above, a sky of greenish blue, changing into saffron and peerless gold. Can you see all that, Bessy?"

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She had listened to him as 'though listening to music.

"Yes; everything."

"A fine picture. I should like to buy it. Can you smell those red roses in the bowl in front of you?"

"Yes. Are they red?"

"As red as Rossetti would have painted them. There are white lilies, too, in the tall vase to-day."

"I knew them by the scent. Now I can almost see them."

"And enjoy them?"

"Yes, through your eyes."

There appeared to be a species of "sight transference" between the two, so sensitive was the sympathy between them. John Cumberledge might describe a face, a garden, a scene in a London street. It was all vivid, lifelike, mordant upon the mind. He had learnt to supply his blind sister with mental vision.

"You won't object to us having an hour's talk, Bessy? We have some business matters to discuss."

"Of course not, dear."

He rose, put his arm through hers, and led her across the hall to the drawing-room, whose windows opened upon the garden. An arm-chair stood before one of the French windows. Cumberledge guided his sister to it.

"You will be quite warm here. How the honeysuckle smells to-night! And the sky is full of stars."

"Thanks, Jack."

"We shall not be long"; and he bent and kissed her forehead.

It was to such a man as this that the master, or, rather, the mistress, of the Red Ghyll entrusted her confessions. They had withdrawn to the library, a room of rich impressions and suggesting aloofness from the world. It was a room to talk in with the lamps turned low and the corners full of shadows. The spirit of human wisdom pervaded it; the books had the air of familiar friends, as though they stood

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there for their worth, and not for the value of their covers.

"So you have made up your mind finally and irretrievably?"

"I shall have to kill my other self, once and for all."

"You realise the finality of the step?"

"Yes, as though it were something sacred."

Cumberledge sat forward in his chair, with the light from the lamp falling upon his face. He was serious and very thoughtful.

"So it comes to this," he said presently: "that you must travel so many thousands of miles to resurrect your original self."

"Yes, and to bury the present identity."

"How?"

"By killing it. The man must disappear, and the woman return. Richard Dathan will die in Australia; his sister Sybil will come back to take up the life he left."

John Cumberledge sat and considered.

"It will work very well, provided no inquisitive friend elects to make inquiries."

"I have no enemies."

"My dear girl, half our acquaintances are our enemies—behind our backs. Still, no one need suspect, and where there is no suspicion, there is no scent to attract the inquisitive meddler."

"I shall send you a cablegram, 'Richard gone,' or something to that effect. Then, from what I have told you, you will know how to act?"

John Cumberledge smoothed his white forelock with his hand.

"Yes, I understand the working of the drama. There will be few legal technicalities; luckily, the property had not been transferred. Everything still stands under the original name. The whole matter has been wholly in my hands; I have trusted nothing to subordinates. Wait, though; what about your handwriting?"

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"Oh, I have thought of that. I shall strike out a new style for myself during the voyage."

The lawyer remained silent for some minutes, as though passing the whole scheme before a critical mind.

"I cannot see anything immoral in the pretence, can you?"

She was looking at him frankly, as though expecting nothing but the truth.

"Ethically it is absolutely innocent, beyond the acting and telling of a few harmless lies. You are only experimenting with your own destiny. What surprises me——"

"Is the trouble I am willing to take for a mere matter of sentiment?"

"Yes."

"Remember, I am a woman."

"That should explain everything."

There was yet more debate between them before John Cumberledge rose and threw the stump of his cigar into the grate.

"What line do you favour?" he asked, as they moved towards the door.

"The Orient Royal Mail. One of their ships sails in a few days. You see, I have had disturbing news from my sister!"

"Then I had better send a clerk down early to-morrow to book a passage. Of course, you want a private cabin."

"That is essential."

"Very well; I will make sure of it."

She stopped him for one moment with a frank outstretching of the hand.

"Thank you for everything."

"I am only trying to discharge a debt," he answered.

Bessy Cumberledge was sitting before the open window in the drawing-room, with her face turned towards the stars that she could not see. She looked round with a smile when her brother and his guest



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entered. She knew his step, even in a crowded room; her hearing gave her sound-glimpses of life, a sense delicate as some Æolian harp set in a window to win whispers from the wind.

"Would you like some music, Bessie?"

"Yes."

"What mood is it to-night?"

"Moonlight—and mystery!"

And her brother sat down at the grand piano and played Chopin to them with a sensuous wizardry that owed nothing to the law.

## CHAPTER XVIII

TOM SWAINE was walking home from work one evening when, at the curve of the road where the Ridge Pond glittered under the green of its waving willows, he came upon a girl sitting in the long grass with a couple of children beside her. The girl had a red sunshade over one shoulder, and a book open in her lap. She was watching the two children, who had been gathering wild flowers, and were emulously arranging them into competitive posies.

"I'm going to have ox-eyed daisies in the middle."

"I've got more billy-buttons than you have, Maudie."

"Yah, but they ain't so fine as my daisies, be they, Miss Jessel?"

"Don't you look at her silly old daisies, Miss Jessel. I've got a lot of dog-roses, I have. Maudie wasn't big enough to reach them. Little baby Maudie! little baby Maudie! Hee, hee, hee!"

The egotistical chorus was interrupted by the elder child receiving a handful of grass full in the face. The girl with the red sunshade had to act as peacemaker between the two, a part that she played with the sharpness of a capable Sunday-school teacher. In glancing up from under her red sunshade she beheld the male creature striding along the road, and recognised Tom Swaine.

Perhaps it was the effect of the sunlight shining through the sunshade, but Rose Jessel's face seemed to take a deeper colour for the moment. Tom hesitated, and then gave a slight tilt to his straw hat.

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He had almost passed the group before some impulse persuaded him to turn, and speak to the girl and show her a little courtesy.

"Good evening, Tom."

She looked up at him from the long grass, flowers on every side of her, but with no glimmer of the old mischief shining in her eyes.

"I didn't know you were in Ravenshoe."

"You haven't heard, I suppose?"

Tom stared. The two children had ceased posy-making, and were interested and critical spectators of the interview.

"I've left Ravensmouth, and come back home."

"Oh!"

"Dad wanted me. Aunt Jane can't manage things as she used to do. I'm glad to be back again, although the place seems dull."

Tom, who had halted with the frosty face of a man confident of his own callousness, found himself in danger of being inveigled into a suggestion of sympathy.

"So you've given up Ravensmouth?" he said curtly.

"Yes."

"For good?"

"I suppose so. I've been back here nearly a week."

An uncomfortable pause intervened. Tom stood looking across the pond, where the swallows were skimming and touching the water with their wings. Rose Jessel watched his face for any responsive softening of the eyes. The two children began to giggle and indulge in rude "asides."

"Be quiet, Gertie. Where are your manners?"

Tom's eyes descended suddenly to the level of the children.

"Mrs. Cook's little girls, Tom. She's been in bed for a month with rheumatic fever, poor soul! We came out for a walk, didn't we, Maudie?"

The children did not respond markedly to Rose's

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motherings. They stared hard at Tom, and shot little glances of impertinent amusement into each other's eyes.

"Do you know the time, Tom?"

"Nearly seven."

"We shall have to be moving. Come along, you two." And she rose out of the long grass, and joined Tom on the road.

"How's Mrs. Swaine?" she asked, looking up at the man, who gave her nothing more than the view of a clear-cut profile.

"Much as usual, thanks."

"Mr. Dathan's away, I hear."

"Yes."

"Nice young gentleman, isn't he?"

"They say so, do they?"

"Don't you like him, then?"

Tom glanced down at her with a species of watchful reserve. He was not to be enticed into confidences that might suggest that he was still something of a sentimental fool.

"Mr. Dathan's as good a master as a man could have," he said, "and that's something to be appreciated."

The two Miss Cooks trotted close on their elders' heels, mutual rivalries forgotten in that sniggering curiosity so characteristic of badly bred children. Gertie twitched Maudie's frock. Maudie whispered mysteriously in Gertie's ear, and giggled. The gossiping instinct, and that genius for imagining all manner of amorous entanglements, develop early in the feminine mind.

Rose loitered a minute at the gate of Tom Swaine's cottage, but the man did not warm to her with the facility that a woman such as Rose Jessel might have desired. He very much held his distance, nor did he appear to relish greatly the manners of the two Miss Cooks.

"You'll drop down and have a chat with father some time, Tom?"

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"I've got everything on my hands there, now the master's away."

Rose looked at him with a slight suggestion of appeal in her eyes.

"Dad was only saying yesterday that you seem quite a stranger."

"It's good of him to put it that way. I'll try to come down some time before long."

Rose went her way with outward meekness, but Tom might have studied the sweeping of other emotions across her face had he had a glimpse of it as she passed down to Ravenshoe. She spoke sharply to the children when their pestering insinuations became too intimate, and came near boxing Miss Gertie Cook's ears.

Tom also was not without meditations on the meeting, for Rose's sudden return and her whole poise puzzled him. She had shown none of the old sprightly and impudent temper. Her finery was less florid, her complacency less confident, less aggressive in its challenge of the spirit of admiration. She seemed to have sunk her coquetry into something quieter and more womanly, and to have forgotten the sharp words that had passed between them in Ravenshoe High Street.

Yet Tom felt an instinctive mistrust of the girl, and how well founded that mistrust was only Rose Jessel could have proved. The meeting had been no mere coincidence so far as she was concerned. Nor had her attitude boasted any natural sincerity. For when a woman ignores a rebuff, and transfigures her temper into something strange and coy, ulterior motives may be credited to her cleverness, and reasons that do not venture to the surface.

Mrs. Swaine was knitting in the little flower garden at the back of the cottage, where Tom had built her a seat under the shelter of a great bay-tree. She had heard and recognised Rose Jessel's voice at the gate, and a shadow of unrest had passed across her face. Her son's love for the girl of old had

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never won over the mother's heart. She had said little, but the distrust had been there, a silence that said more than querulous words.

"Wasn't that Rose Jessel I heard, Tom?"

She asked the question mildly, with no parental challenge.

"Yes, mother."

"There's a letter for you, dear. It's on the mantelshef in the kitchen. I thought Rose Jessel had left Ravenshoe for good?"

"So did everybody."

"She's quite a stranger to us, anyway."

"Yes, mother. Is the letter from Mr. Dathan?"

"You'd better open it and see, lad." For Mrs. Swaine, like many lovable people, had a habit of suggesting the obvious, and stating as a probability a fact as inevitable as that three and three make six.

Tom took the letter into the front parlour to read it. The note-paper was some of Mr. Cumberledge's, and bore the lawyer's address of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"MY DEAR TOM,

"I have just received news here that has altered the whole aspect of life for me for the next few months. I am sailing for Australia by the next boat, as matters have arisen there which I had not foreseen. I shall probably bring my sister back with me.

"It is a most bewildering business, having to rush off to the other side of the globe like this, but the news that I have received makes my going absolutely imperative.

"I want you to remain in charge of everything while I am away, and I know you will do this for me as a friend. Mr. Cumberledge here, in Lincoln's Inn, has the handling of all my affairs. He will remit money weekly to cover all expenses. You had better hand out a proper sum to Mrs. Marvin.

"I know that I am pushing a good deal of

responsibility upon you, but your shoulders are broad enough. I have hardly an hour to spare with the bustle of preparation, so I shall not come down before I sail.

"If my sister returns with me, we shall be back in England in the autumn, perhaps before you have quite cleared the apple-trees, and, as Magnus said, 'there will still be red cheeks to be kissed.'

"If you like to use any of my books, you know where to find them; and, Tom, order what we decided on in the matter of roses from Lancaster; also the bulbs from Holland. And you might get the shrubs in we thought of planting along the drive and in the corner of the old yard. If you want extra labour in, have it. You will have quite enough to do.

"My kindest remembrances to Mrs. Swaine.

"Ever yours truly,

"RICHARD DATHAN.

"P.S.—Here is a trial in tact, Tom, and I commend it to you. Mrs. Hermon has written to me that she will supervise things in my absence. I have replied that there is no need. You will probably see Mrs. Hermon, none the less. Only understand that I have given her no authority. All the authority is yours."

Tom read the letter through, not a little astonished at the news that it contained, but feeling that glow at the heart that generous feeling awakens between man and man. He could not help wondering over the nature of the sudden necessity that had carried Richard Dathan off on such a voyage at such short notice. Possibly it concerned money or property out yonder, or perhaps that sister who was little more to Tom than a name. Richard Dathan had often spoken of her. "They were as alike as two apples from the same tree," he had said.

Tom felt sorry to be left alone at the Red Ghyll, a sentiment not common to the average servant, who

regards an employer in the light of "the cat." But between Tom and Richard Dathan there were other ties than those of service and of pay. They had worked together, thought together, grown gradually but surely into each other's lives. The absence of a true friend is like the turning of a mirror towards the wall, or like the enforced closing of a half-read book that may not be opened again for many months.

"There is some satisfaction in being trusted," thought Tom, "even though one does not seem to grow rich. I'm not working for a master, but a friend."

Straightway he sat down at his old desk, and wrote a letter to the master of the Red Ghyll at Mr. Cumberledge's office in Lincoln's Inn Fields—the short, simple letter of a man to be relied upon, frank, straight-faced, and without cant.

Tom Swaine could not claim to be Mr. Richard Dathan's sole and single correspondent in Ravenshoe, for Mrs. Portia Hermon had received a letter—a letter whose confidential and intimate tone had fluttered the secret sentiments of that lady's heart. She was elated by the pleasant candour of the man, especially when it displayed itself in a chivalrous and suggestive faith in her goodwill. Mrs. Hermon, as the Australian had confessed to Tom, had written a most sympathetic and personal letter in return. Let Mr. Dathan but hint at anything, and she would undertake all manner of matters in his absence. Should she go down to the Red Ghyll and keep an eye upon the servants? Swaine was a reliable fellow, she believed, but the best of men need supervising, or the results are sure to be deplorable. If Mr. Cumberledge came down to Ravenshoe, she would be delighted to entertain him. She was sure, also, that all "the people" in the neighbourhood would welcome Mr. Dathan's sister. It was even within the bounds of probability that she—Mrs. Hermon—would find in her a dear, sympathetic friend!

Thus did the master of the Red Ghyll leave the



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ground fertile for the sowing of the new and mysterious seed. His absence would be faithfully and flatteringly explained by Mrs. Portia Hermon. Everyone would be familiar with what had passed. There would be no crude sensationalism in the changing of the characters.

## CHAPTER XIX

A GLARING sky above white awnings, a glaring sea, a faint trail of smoke towards the horizon, a track of troubled water merging into the restless infinitude of the waves. Chairs by the score ranged along the decks. Languor everywhere—the languor of Europeans basking in the heat. A few books in evidence, a few lapsfuls of needlework or knitting, a few irrepressible children with energy to be squandered in the inevitable irritation of their elders.

Lying back in a deck-chair, with a writing-case upon her knees, sat Mr. Cumberledge's client, a gentlemanly fellow enough, in grey flannels and a Panama hat. To sea, sky, and paper the writer's eyes seemed to appeal for inspiration. The letter in hand appeared perfunctory and dull. The sentences crawled forth into the light of day as though the heat accounted for their slothfulness.

In a neighbouring corner sat two suburban ladies who had inherited money, and were travelling in order to patronise bourgeois acquaintances on their return. They had dragged their British propensities with them into the expanse of the Indian Ocean, and were discussing Mr. Cumberledge's client with frankness and rancour.

"A most bearish young person. So excessively reserved and stuck-up."

"Who is he?"

"Some pork-butcher's son from America, most likely."

"The ideas don't seem to flow very fast, do they?"

"Those good-looking young men are usually stupid."

The letter was written at last, sealed, and tucked away into a flap of the writing-case. A capacious notebook made its appearance on the writer's knees. He appeared to be busying himself with some eternal and never-ending scribblings, eyeing them critically from time to time, and glancing from page to page as though for reference. The two suburban ladies were keenly interested. When people are penned up together in a ship, the human comedy becomes concentrated and confirmed into one tedious and intriguing quibble.

"A diary, I suppose."

"Perhaps he's writing verses."

"If it's a diary, I wonder what on earth he finds to write about."

The letters written on the Australian liner came back from Colombo to that land of far landscapes in the English South. Mrs. Hermon read hers at her breakfast-table on the day of the Ravenshoe Fair. A photograph was enclosed with the letter—a photograph of Richard Dathan taken on board the liner by one of the stewards who supplemented his pay by the artistic use of a hand-camera. Tom Swaine's letter, though briefer than Mrs. Hermon's, contained an almost identical paragraph—a paragraph whose significance neither lady nor henchman understood.

"I suppose it must be the tropical heat, but I have felt far from well these last few days. Two nights ago I fainted in the saloon, and had to be carried to my cabin—a humiliating confession for an able-bodied man!

"The doctor on board is a youngster of five-and-twenty—a delightful boy, whose one aim in life appears to be to grow a moustache and look ten years older than he is. He came in to see me in my cabin, listened to my chest, frowned wisely, and sent me a bottle of execrable physic. He also asked me whether I had ever been medically examined, and advised me to see one of the leading Melbourne men

on reaching Australia. He hinted that I might have some affection of the heart. Poor dear child, he had to say something to appear impressive."

Now, had Mrs. Hermon read a certain humorous article on "The Amateur Novel," she would have remembered that the mention of a fainting fit on the fifth page foreshadowed the villain's death by syncope on page 335. But Mrs. Hermon was ignorant of such fictional ingenuity; and even if she had been familiar with the subject, she would probably not have considered it relevant to the possibilities of prosaic and unpretentious reality.

These two letters reached Ravenshoe on the day of the summer fair—a yearly festival held in the Castle Park, which it desecrated with rubbish, noise, roguery, and bad manners. In its opening stages Ravenshoe Fair was respectable enough, with many of the "county people" present to watch the various races and competitions, and attend at the distribution of the prizes. When dusk fell, and the duchess had departed, then the spirit of Hogarth might have discovered much to paint. There was always a bevy of brawling, red-mouthed young blackguards from Ravensmouth, with a number of rough girls in gaudy blouses, who came to give a gross flavour to the scene. Beer could be had in plenty from one big booth. Waste-paper and banana-skins littered the grass. Steam roundabouts blared, rifles cracked, men and girls shouted, squeaked, and romped.

Torn Swaine had never missed a Ravenshoe Fair since he had toddled there as a youngster, when his father's name had figured on the prize-list for a guinea. The memory of boyhood's zest remained with him—the memory of the rides on the merry-go-round, the watching of Punch and Judy, the buying of pink-and-yellow sweets and gingerbread men and horses. There were sack races, obstacle races, pony races, three-legged races, and egg-and-spoon races for the girls. Men climbed the greasy pole for a leg of mutton. Coco-nuts were knocked off the sticks,

bottles smashed at the shooting galleries. There were the swings, the wire trapeze, the "try-your-strength" machines, the flaring naphtha lamps glorifying cheap china, cakes, and toys. For the child Ravenshoe Fair was a veritable galaxy of delights; for the man it had a less happy and savoury significance.

Almost the very first people Tom met along the main road by the lake were Mr. Anthony Jessel, in black tail-coat and bowler, and his daughter. Tom might have escaped them but for the sharpness of Mr. Jessel's eyes and his energetic familiarity that never suffered an acquaintance to escape in peace.

"Bless my honour, Mr. Swaine! you don't mean to tell me that you've come down to this frivolous and unprofitable show!"

The serious twinkle in Mr. Jessel's eyes betrayed the spirit of waggery.

"Leaving your responsibilities to look at a merry-go-round and hear ginger-bottles pop! And a young man of your respectability!"

Tom laughed, and felt himself in the grip of Mr. Jessel's loquacity. He shook hands with Rose, and stood looking into space with the air of a man not in sympathy with his surroundings.

"So you've come down to see a little of the fun, have you? Don't tell me that you hard-working young men don't mind hustling the young women a bit and playing at kiss-in-the-ring, at catch-me-who-can after dark. Why, here's Rose waiting for someone to give her a ride on the steam-horses."

Tom glanced for a moment at the girl, and was struck by the subdued expression of her face. He noticed also that she was very simply dressed in a plain green blouse and a black skirt, and hat with a few red roses to give colour.

"Dad always thinks he must put on his funny mood when he comes out to Ravenshoe Fair."

"Thinks, my dear, does he? Can't an old man have a natural flow of spirits on occasions? What's the clock say? Seems to me we might turn in some-

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where and have a cup of tea. What d'you say, Tom? Come along with us."

Metaphorically Mr. Jessel had the younger man by the button. There was no damping his excessive good-humour, no clouding the radiant red face under the big bowler hat.

"I had some tea before I came," said Tom.

"There's only one 'T' in the alphabet, my boy; but we ain't bound down in the matter of meals. Rose wouldn't forgive me if I didn't find her a young man."

The girl did not snub the parent, but she gave Tom an inimitable little look that seemed to say, "Don't listen to his nonsense; try to understand that I am learning to hate such things."

Tom capitulated to Mr. Anthony Jessel's importunity.

"There doesn't seem such a crowd this year," he said, as they moved off in the direction of a big marquee.

"There never was," retorted Mr. Jessel laconically; "rats were the size of donkeys when I was a boy."

At one of the long tables in the big tent Mr. Jessel chumped lettuces, and maintained a monotonous flow of merriment that was wasted upon his daughter and Tom Swaine. They were sitting beside each other, yet a little apart—Rose with her eyes studying nothing more manly than her plate; Tom with a mind full of thoughts that had become mere echoes of the past. The girl's silence, her lack of vivacity and of glitter, set Tom wondering as he watched her out of the corners of his eyes. Now and again she lifted a blank face to her father's raillery, and gave a brief glance at Tom, as though appealing against Mr. Jessel's taste.

A knot of youths came crowding into the marquee, their straw hats at pronounced angles, their vulgar swagger reminding one of the froth and fluster of a newly tapped beer-barrel. One of them caught sight

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of Rose, and acknowledged the recognition by a significant flapping of the hand.

"Hallo, Rosie! Chase me, girls! Oh my!"

The greeting was given in that squeaking falsetto so characteristic of certain forms of low-class humour. Rose, to her dignity, ignored the salute.

"Ain't we proud to-day! How's pa?"

Mr. Jessel turned slowly on his bench, and protruded a sharp white beard over a bony shoulder.

"Very kind of you to inquire for me, my lord. I trust you're quite well?"

The youth hesitated, and regarded the cobbler with a suspicious grin.

"How's your esteemed mother, my lord?"

"All right when I left her."

"I'm very glad to hear it. How much did she give you to come out here and do the duke on—sixpence and the price of a third-class return?"

A sympathetic comrade interposed with the remark:

"Grandfather's getting funny, ain't 'e, Bert?"

Mr. Jessel's eyes twinkled.

"We like to see such real swells out our way, you know. We're quiet people out here, and we only get a few lords and esquires to look at, and it's a real treat to get an insight into the latest fashions. Last thing in ties, your grace, eh? Reminds me of a beautiful big butterfly crawling up a cabbage-stalk."

The youth could not carry it off with gusto, for everyone seemed staring at him, and he caught the glint of Tom Swaine's eyes. Discretion prompted him to sit down hurriedly, and he squeezed himself in between two friends.

"They're so terrible smart in these days," said Mr. Jessel, addressing himself to the world at large; "there's no living up to it for us old fogies."

A stolid yeoman farmer, who had been munching cake, jerked a yellow beard amiably in Mr. Jessel's direction.

"They've all run to top," he said, with a chuckle; "plenty o' green stuff, and no bottom."

"Rosa Reformata" might have been the title written beneath the type of the girl's womanhood that summer day. She walked patiently between Tom Swaine and her father, listening to the old man's witticisms and ignoring the many flattering challenges that were given by the male crowd. She even happened upon the two Miss Cooks standing disconsolate and penniless before the steam "roundabout." Rose unearthed the magic sixpence from her pocket, and watched the two youngsters go whirling round to the tune of "Pansy Faces."

The memory of sundry odd duties to be performed summoned Mr. Jessel homewards towards dusk. Tom glanced at his own watch and at the sun sinking below the beech woods on the hills.

"What about the fireworks, eh?"

"I don't care much, dad."

"Tom, here, hasn't had half a holiday. Keep him from ruining his constitution, my dear, by watching the £ s. d. disappear in smoke."

Tom's eyes met Rose's. She coloured slightly and looked away.

"It will be getting rough soon. I shan't stay unless Tom does."

"He'll look after you all right. Bring her along home, Tom, and have some supper."

And Tom, without gauging the measure of his prejudices, accepted the responsibility, perhaps because he felt a little sorry for the girl.

They watched the fireworks together, standing under a great cedar that made the dew-fresh dusk seem warm and odorous. A pale glow still held along the hills, and the cries of the deer came from the dark wildernesses of the park. The transient glare of the "set pieces" lit up the turrets of the castle, the tall trees, and the many faces of the crowd. Down by the lake the naphtha lamps flared and spluttered, making the grass land a pool of fantastic lights and



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shadows and deepening the gloom of the quiet water.

The last rocket had spread its stars of crimson and green, and Rose had drawn a little closer to Tom Swaine. She shivered slightly, and glanced up into his face.

"It's getting cold."

"We ought to be going."

"Yes; there's the castle clock striking ten."

They passed down towards the lake, where the fun was waxing furious, men and girls chasing each other, throwing confetti, and squirting scented water from those weapons known as "ladies' tormentors." Rose drew closer under the shelter of Tom's figure, her nearness suggesting that subtle sense of protection that never lacks for charm.

An overgrown boy with a bowler hat on the back of his head dodged from the crowd and threw confetti in Rose's face. Tom set a hand in the middle of the gentleman's chest, and sent him staggering against a group of girls.

"Now, then, who're ye shoving?"

He appeared militant, but a glance at Tom's squareness of outline seemed to chasten him. Words were wiser than deeds—that jeering coarseness that forms the courage of the average British "yahoo."

"My hat, ain't we somebody! Mind the lady don't get into trouble for being out late. Oh, dear, what will mother say?"

Rose walked on beside Tom with a white, expressionless face. Neither of them spoke till they were past the zone of light cast by the naphtha lamps.

"How hateful these people are!"

Tom looked at her with curious grimness. With how much knowledge did she credit him?

"A birch-rod would do a lot of good in these days," he said.

"It seems to spoil the park so. We could hear the water running over the weir if there wasn't all that din."

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Tom thrust his hands into his pockets, and looked up at the stars.

"You're glad you're home again, then?" he said at last.

She swayed a little nearer to him for three steps.

"Yes."

"It's better."

"Ever so much." And she seemed silenced by her thoughts.

At the gate of the park stood an old cherry-tree smothered by white clematis. The creeper had clambered to the topmost boughs, and glimmered, a mass of milky whiteness, in the dusk of the night. The cherry-tree was being slain by it, but passers-by thought only of the clematis.

"How lovely!"

Rose had half turned, while Tom had gone a step beyond her.

"I can remember that when I was just three feet high."

"Can you?" said Tom.

And they passed out into the night together.

## CHAPTER XX

CASTLE and church clocks were chiming in unison when Tom breasted the hill above Ravenshoe town, and took the old high road towards the Red Ghyll. The hour spent with Rose Jessel under the cedar-tree had brought many complex and contending thoughts to the surface of the man's mind. She had seemed to have given him glimpses of a deeper, truer nature, of a womanliness that had once more clasped the girdle of honour about her loins. How much of it was sincere? Tom asked himself that question with the grimness of a man unable to forget how much of his own self the girl had sacrificed in treachery to her own good fame.

Tom halted on the brow of the hill, and leant against a gate that led into a field—the same gate he had rested upon that night when Rose had lost her beauty for him. The coincidence was not without a forcible impress on his mind. Looking down once more into the deep glooms of the castle valley, he could still see the flare of the naphtha lamps, and hear the distant murmur rising to touch the silence of the hills. How much sincerity was there behind that one small face? how much truth in those sensuous eyes? He could never trust her again. That had been the judgment uttered by his own manhood in the days of disenchantment, and with a manhood such as Tom's distrust meant the breaking of the arrows of desire.

And yet her nearness, her aloneness, had hurt him and troubled him that night. It had made him breathe more deeply, like a man who is brought suddenly before the portrait of one who once had been

most dear. The very consciousness of the disenchantment was not without its tones of bitterness and regret. Man, however true to his own truth, can never forget the thrill of the old springtides or the scent of the dead Junes.

"I suppose he has thrown her over." And he moved away slowly from the gate.

"After all, she may be learning what sort of place the real world is. But there are some things in this life that cannot be forgotten."

No lights were burning behind the windows of the cottage when Tom reached the white gate in the hedge, and he imagined that his mother had grown tired of waiting for him and had gone to bed. Finding the front door locked, he walked round the garden to the back of the cottage, and tried the door leading into the kitchen. That also was locked. Tom shook it, and hammered with his fist.

"Are you there, mother?"

He concluded that she must have gone to bed, thinking that she had left one of the doors unfastened. Tom returned to the front of the cottage, and stood looking up at the window of his mother's room.

"Are you asleep?"

The little casement blinked at the stars, but Tom heard no one stirring. He picked up a pebble or two from the path, tossed them up against the glass, and waited.

"Hallo! hallo!"

The first feeling of foolishness at being locked out from his home gave place to a sense of genuine unrest. He tried the door a second time, and then, turning to the parlour window, took out his knife and slipped the catch back with the blade. There were pots of flowers on the window-sill. Tom lifted them aside before climbing in, avoiding the little table that held his mother's work and books.

Tom stood a moment listening, his hand groping in his coat-pocket for his matches. The loud breathing as of someone asleep came from the utter dark-

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ness of the room. The first match snapped in the striking, and fell to the floor with a momentary flare, giving the man but a flashing glimpse of the room. Tom struck a second match, shielding it in the hollow of his hand.

"Good God ! "

His mother was lying on the old horsehair sofa against the wall, her head hanging back over the cushion, so that the whole throat showed. Her right arm dangled from the shoulder, so that the hand rested upon the floor. Her breath came and went with a deep snoring rasp in the throat, the lips being puffed out and sucked in again with each breath.

The match flickered out, leaving the man once more in darkness. The momentary glimpse that it had given him had been like the flashing of a lamp at night upon the dead face of one washed up by the sea.

Tom's hand shook as he struck a third match, and lit the candle that stood on the old oak dresser behind the door. He bent over the figure on the couch, holding the light close to his mother's face, so that it made two flickering images in the open yet sightless eyes. Tom lifted the right arm and folded it over his mother's body, yet the limb slipped down again as soon as he withdrew his hand, the knuckles and the two thin gold rings on the third finger striking the brick floor.

Tom left the candle burning on the table, locked the door after him, and ran out into the road. It was all downhill for him into Ravenshoe town, and he went with the night wind beating upon his face. He had forgotten everything for the moment save that figure on the couch, the open mouth, the open eyes, the flaccid hanging arm.

In half an hour he was breasting the brow of the hill again, with his heart drumming against his ribs. Even when he had unlocked the cottage door a madness of unrest possessed him, and he went to

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and fro between the room and the grey high road as many times in as many minutes. The steam roundabout in the distant park was still blaring "Dolly Gray," and the tune seemed one eternal repetition, spacing out his impatience as he waited for that star of light to show between the hedgerows on the way to Ravenshoe. When Emmery dismounted from his bicycle he found Tom holding the gate open with one hand, his face haggard in the light of the lamp.

"Can you get a bed put up down here?"

Tom had been standing by the couch holding the candle, while the doctor made his examination.

"Of course."

He climbed the stairs, and set to work with the feverish fierceness of a man lowering away a boat from the side of a sinking ship. So prosaic a task as the pulling to pieces of an iron bed had, none the less, a significance for the son.

"No, not against the wall. Put it up in the middle of the room."

"Will you hold the ends for me, sir, a moment?"

"Yes."

Tom had the framework together and the laths in place, cutting his knuckles more than once when the spanner slipped from the nut-head.

"What is it, sir—a stroke?"

He asked the question as he slipped in the last lath.

"I'm afraid so, Swaine—yes."

Tom twisted the last nut into place with a fierce wrench of the wrist.

"And to think that I was loitering down at the fair! God forgive me!"

"You can't blame yourself," said the doctor quietly.

"I can't help it, sir."

"These things come without warning. They cannot be foreseen."

Tom made the bed in silence, Emmery helping

him. Now and again Tom cast sharp glances at his mother.

"You will want someone to nurse her, Swaine."

"I can do that, sir."

"My dear fellow, you can't do everything. Is there a reliable neighbour near?"

Tom remembered Mrs. Marvin.

"Mr. Datham's housekeeper might come."

"Is she trustworthy?"

"A good soul, so long as there's no blood to be seen."

"You had better go for her at once."

"I will."

They bent over the couch, Tom putting his arms about his mother's body, and letting her head rest against his shoulder. Between them they lifted her on to the bed, propping her against the pillows and cushions Emmery had piled up at the head.

"You will have to help Mrs. Marvin to get her undressed, Swaine."

"All right, sir."

"Do it as though she would break if you moved her too much. And see that she does not slip down low in the bed. I shall want you to come down to Ravenshoe and bring back some medicine, so you had better get off now to the Red Ghyll. I shall stay here till you come back."

And Tom picked up his hat and ran.

When the grey dawn came up far down the dim valley-lands towards the sea, Tom stood leaning against the garden-gate, feeling the weariness of the reaction after a night of dolour and unrest. He took his pipe from his pocket, filled it mechanically, and began to smoke. The raw morning was pungent with the perfumes of the coming day. Dew glistened everywhere. A faint turmoil of gold gathered and grew in the silent east.

Tom glanced round the garden, where the colours of the flowers were shining out with the dawn. A great clump of mignonette bloomed in an odd corner

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close to the hedge. The scent of it came up to the man, to become an eternal memory of that summer dawn—a scent that would ever bring back to him a sense of strangeness and of impending loss,

Tom had asked Emmery to tell him the whole uncompromising truth.

"It is just a swing of the balance, Swaine; the next few hours should tell."

"Then she may not die?"

"No; but if she recovers, I am afraid she will never be—the same."

The words seemed to pass and repass through Tom's mind as he stood at the gate and watched the dawn come up. It was like the closing of a book for him, the sealing of one season of his life. Even the realities of the past night had retreated to an infinite distance. Tom had a feeling of awe and of strangeness, as though he were in some dim new land, where the very hills were unfamiliar and grey with the chill mystery of the dawn.



## CHAPTER XXI

TOM SWAINE was leaving the cottage for his day's work at the Red Ghyll when Rose Jessel came down between the hedgerows from Ravenshoe, solicitous womanhood in a white cotton dress, a great straw hat trimmed with roses shading her face. Tom, with his hand still on the latch of the door, met her with the slight frown of a man in no mood to have indiscriminate sentiment squandered in his service.

"I have only just heard. How is she? I felt that I must come."

She had opened the garden gate and swept down the brick-paved path between the borders full of cottage flowers. She spoke in a quick half-whisper, her eyes fixed questioningly on Tom's face. He had closed the door gently, so that no sound should penetrate to the darkened room.

"It was good of you to come," he said, with some reserve.

"I couldn't help it. I felt guilty—in a way—because I kept you from going home last night. Is she any better?"

Tom's tired consciousness was startled by the intensity with which she spoke. He had never seen Rose Jessel so wholly swayed by what seemed to be the spontaneous rush of real emotion.

"There's not much change, I'm afraid."

"How tired you look!"

"I've been up all night."

"Can I do anything?"

"Mrs. Marvin is with mother."

"Yes. Won't you let me help, Tom? I feel I must. I'm no fool."

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He looked down at her with grave, sleepless eyes. It would have been difficult for any woman not to have felt her heart warming to him in sympathy.

"It's good of you, Rose."

"Oh, don't say that!"

"I have to go off to work."

"Must you to-day?"

"It helps," he said grimly. "I can't do anything by moping here."

She lifted her face to him with an indescribable glimmer of appeal in her eyes.

"Just let me stay and help Mrs. Marvin. I won't interfere, Tom; I promise that."

He seemed to hesitate for a moment.

"Mrs. Marvin might want someone to send to Dr. Emmery."

"That's true." And he opened the door for her, and in silence suffered her to pass in.

Tom went to his work at the Red Ghyll with a strange sense of numbness at the heart. And yet the grip of the hands on the tools seemed to awake the habitual reflexes in the man's body. He worked steadily, with the energy of the machine, not realising, perhaps, the meaning or the purpose of all he did. In such seasons of keen suspense it would seem as though life withdrew from the fringe of physical details to concentrate its energy in the supersensuous mind.

The girl Nellie brought him out fresh-brewed tea when the dinner-hour came round. Tom was mowing the lawn in front of the house, the whirr of the machine in tune with the sleepy warmth of the summer day.

"It's gone twelve, Mr. Swaine."

Tom did not seem to hear her.

"I've brought you out a pot of tea."

He paused suddenly in his stride behind the mower, and looked up at the girl with a flash of awakened consciousness.

"Thanks, Nellie."

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She turned and left him, feeling in a vague, instinctive way that she could not stay near Tom, for there was something about him that made her realise that the man would be glad to be left to his own thoughts.

The evening came with a quiet, gliding reverence, a slight haze on the hills, and no rustling of the sedges about the old farm-pond. Tom put his tools away, and fed the birds in the orchard before starting home. He had left word with Mrs. Marvin that they should send for him if any marked change showed in his mother, but no message had come to him through all the long summer day.

The sunlight slanted through the boughs of the spruce-trees as Tom passed up the avenue, with a dull dread in him darkening the thought of "home." A sense of the inevitable weighs heavily at times on man's shoulders, and Tom had never found great mercy shown him by those superhuman forces that cleave out the contours of earthly life. Success in the natural meaning had never come within his grip, and even in the deeper chances he had suffered nothing but grim rebuffs. It was not so many years since he had seen his father die—a weary, discouraged, mute old man. And now he believed that death was taking his mother from him. Even if she lived, it might be the shadow that would survive, and not the vital self.

Tom's thoughts turned instinctively to the man who came into his life as a friend those last few months. He felt an outreaching of the soul to him—a desire to speak out all that was in his heart, to realise the nearness of the one mind that could sympathise and understand. It is only when a man is hurt at the heart that his instincts discover whither they may bear their bitterness, even as he discovers in darkness the need in him for immortal light.

Tom saw a white dress flicker suddenly between the dark boles of the trees. It was Rose Jessel. She

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came towards him under the shadows of the spruces, with an air of eagerness that could not be misread.

"She is better; I felt that I must come and tell you."

Tom's face cleared like a misty morning.

"Better?"

"We saw a change in her. Dr. Emmery came half an hour ago. He thinks she will live."

Tom walked on in silence for some moments, with Rose Jessel at his side. The girl understood his silence, nor did she grudge it him, being wise in her own desires. Life seemed to be bringing them closer to one another. Rose realised it to her own avail, but perhaps the man did not.

## CHAPTER XXII

"CABLEGRAM for Mr. Cumberledge."

A fair-haired youngster put his pen down hastily, and slipped down from his office-stool with a briskness that had method in it.

"Shall I take it, Mr. Cave?"

The confidential clerk glanced up from his desk.

"What's that?"

"A cablegram."

"Oh!"

"I suppose I may take it in?"

"Alice is in Hug-me-Land, Cave. Be kind to the child; she wants a private interview to ask a favour."

The two "articled" gentlemen who had been rubbing their heads together over the pages of the *Sportsman* interrupted their devotions to honour the paid clerk with their satire.

"All right, Bains; you can take it in."

"What bliss, sweet Alice!"

"Be careful, now. Cumberledge's a bachelor: he hasn't an ounce of sentiment."

"Oh, shut up!" said the fair-haired youth, with an angry blush.

"Isn't it catching, now! I suppose she does it just like that."

Mr. Cumberledge's deep voice answered the sedate rapping of the youngster's knuckles on the panels of the private door.

"Come in. What is it, Bains?"

"A cablegram, sir."

"Cablegram?"

"Yes." And he laid the envelope on a corner of Mr. Cumberledge's desk.

"Thanks, Bains. Tell them not to make so much noise out there."

"Yes, sir." And he hesitated a moment, with his hand on the door-knob. The weather forecast did not seem altogether favourable, and Mr. Bains was a shy youth.

"Might I speak to you a moment, sir?"

Mr. Cumberledge glanced up at him. He had not touched the cablegram as yet.

"Well, Bains?"

"I was to have my holiday this month, sir."

"Yes."

"I should like to postpone it till next month, if I may."

Mr. Cumberledge picked up the cablegram.

"Any reason, Bains?"

"Well—yes—sir," and the clerk wriggled self-consciously. "I want to make my fortnight fit in with somebody else's fortnight."

"Oh, I see." And Mr. Cumberledge smiled as he took the paper-knife and slit the flap of the envelope.

"Jackson says he'll change with me, sir, if you don't object."

"Chivalrous fellow! I suppose he has no other person's fortnight to consider?"

"No, sir."

"Very well, Bains."

"Thank you very much, sir." And he backed out with a blush, leaving Mr. Cumberledge alone.

The lawyer brushed the white forelock from his forehead, and spread the cablegram on his writing-pad with the deliberation of a man whose head and hands were never flurried.

"Richard died yesterday. Am writing. Expect me in England."

"SYBIL DATHAN."

John Cumberledge glanced reflectively through

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those few words flashed for so many odd shillings through so many thousand miles of sea. Then he pushed back his chair, pulled out a bunch of keys, and unlocked his own private safe, whose contents were preserved sacredly even from the eyes of the most trusted clerk. The lawyer drew out certain documents, looked them through carefully, jotting down a few notes in a little pocket-book bound in red leather. Then he relocked them in the private safe and returned to his desk, and glanced through the notes he had made as though deciding on some line of action.

The whole affair would have seemed excessively grotesque to a man less deeply versed in the fantastic oddities of life. Law, in the abstract, may seem arid and prosaic, but in the secret corners of a lawyer's mind many curious truths lie securely hid. It is only ignorance that judges the mere surface. The graveyard may show nothing but headstones and green mounds, yet how much life lies under the rank grass!

John Cumberledge smiled over his meditations with some of the sly joy of a metaphysician who tracks the truth into the heart of a seeming lie. The ingenious fiction was but a bubble blown from the breath of an imaginative mind. If it had floated awhile, iridescent in the sunlight, and then vanished into innocent nothingness, could the breath that had floated it be called a lie?

## CHAPTER XXIII

SITTING at the window of Mrs. Swaine's room, Rose Jessel saw Rudyard's fly drive past from Ravenshoe with a stranger leaning back against the shabby cushions. Rose's dark head bent forward for a moment between the leaves of a red geranium and the white chintz curtain.

"A-ah!"—and she yawned behind her hand—"it's about as dull here as it could be. Fancy me taking the trouble to look at an old gentleman in a grey squash hat! I suppose it's time I gave the old lady her milk."

She put the needlework from her lap—it was one of Tom's old shirts that she was patching—and turned towards the bed with an assumption of sweet cheerfulness worthy of the village angel who smiles on the world from the pages of a pious novelette.

"Time for your milk, mother. I've just been putting a few stitches in one of Tom's shirts."

Mrs. Swaine had been asleep. Her misty eyes looked up at the girl with an expressionless stare that seemed to betray neither liking nor distrust.

"Shall I hold it for you?"

Mrs. Swaine gave a slight shake of the head. A hand moved from under the quilt, and reached unsteadily for the feeding-cup.

"You'd better let me hold it." And she put the thin hand aside with the casual tyranny of youth, and held the spout of the cup to the pale lips. "Drink it down now, mother. You won't get your strength back unless you take your food."

Rose Jessel returned to the chair by the window, picked up Tom's shirt, and drew the table and work-basket within reach.



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"It's no fun talking to an image that can't answer a single word," she thought. "I suppose I must do my best just to appear bright and chatty. What on earth am I to talk about? I've told her all the Ravenshoe news three times over, and she can't tell you what she likes and what she doesn't like any more than a baby."

So she began to chatter about Tom, about the garden, about the doctor's new motor-car, about the millinery and linen sale down at Dallaway's in Ravenshoe, her tongue flitting from topic to topic. Mrs. Swaine's white face lay like a mask on the pile of pillows. The hæmorrhage into the brain had not only paralysed her right arm and leg, but had left her with aphasia. Not a word could pass her lips.

"There, that's finished." And she gave a sigh of very genuine relief. "You mustn't tell him I've been mending his old shirts, you know. I've been all through dad's clothes since I came back home, and a regular rag-shop it was, too. I wonder Aunt Jane had had the face to hang them on the line."

Mrs. Swaine was probably more bored and weary than Rose Jessel, for the girl's incessant chatter was like the jarring of an unlatched door. The elder woman's heart had never warmed to Rose. She had been jealous of her, and a genuine mistrust had justified her prejudices. Now in her impotence she had to suffer the girl's presence, to feel that repulsion that became perhaps the keener because of her inability to murmur or to escape.

Rose glanced at the clock. It was not yet twelve.

"Oh, lor', I'm just about sick of this! If ever there was a ministering angel! I wonder why Tom doesn't come back here for lunch?"

She let her thoughts escape through the window with a very listless yawn. Sick folk are often extraordinarily sensitive to externals. A tinge of perfunctoriness in the voice, the slightest suggestion of assumed patience, the glimmer of a forced smile—none of these escape. Mrs. Swaine had gauged the

girl's goodness by sheer intuition. Rose had crept like a shy nun into the quiet life of that country cottage, wise in her care not to be seen too much by Tom. She had been content to appeal by suggestion rather than by contact. to be zealous in kindnesses that would be reflected back upon the man.

Mrs. Swaine had seen all this behind those dim and half-slumbering eyes of hers. As for Rose, she beheld nothing but a thin, wry-faced little woman, mute and helpless, fed with a spoon. Tom's mother was a species of lay-figure to be draped with becoming kindnesses for the bettering of the picture. The girl forgot, perhaps, that there were intelligence and thought behind that shrunken, clay-coloured face. It was not easy to suppress some measure of impatience and contempt for the bedridden old thing who could hardly mumble. Yet we are quick to realise when we are tolerated or used as devices in the scheme of life, and Tom Swaine's mother had read Rose Jessel's heart under the superficial kindness of the moment.

Meanwhile the fly from Ravenshoe had carried John Cumberledge down to the Red Ghyll, where the lawns were sleek under the summer sun. There had been no slinking while Richard Dathan was away, no drinking and smoking in the potting-shed, no late coming and early going, no transference of stock, no petty peculations that concerned the nail-box or the egg-basket. The whole place had a clean, burnished look. No out-of-the-way corners had been neglected, no flowers left to be broken for lack of bass and sticks.

Mr. Cumberledge had a brief interview with Mrs. Marvin—an interview that left the old lady with an expression of sorrowful stupor upon her face. His chief concern was with Mr. Dathan's "agent." The lawyer found Tom in the orchard, fixing a "cherry-clack" in a great summer apple-tree where the black-birds had been dishonestly busy. Mr. Cumberledge had a glimpse of a brown-armed, brown-throated

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figure smothering its way downwards through leaves and golden fruit.

Rose was at Mrs. Swaine's window, with the afternoon still young, when she saw Tom coming up the road from the Red Ghyll with the stranger who had passed that morning in Rudyard's fly. They were walking slowly, as though in earnest conversation, Tom with his head bowed down a little, his hands in the side-pockets of his coat. The empty fly was following them along the road.

Rose drew back from the window when they stopped outside the garden gate. Though they stood there for some minutes talking together, she could not catch the meaning of what they said. The stranger held out his hand to Tom as he turned to step into the Ravenshoe fly.

"As soon as I have definite news I will let you know."

Tom remained at the gate, watching the wheels drive the dust from the high road till a high hedge-row hid the carriage from sight.

Mrs. Swaine was asleep, and Rose, picking up her hat that was lying on a chair, slipped out by the front door into the garden. Tom turned towards the cottage at the same moment. He was half-way down the path before he raised his head and saw Rose Jessel.

"You're back early."

His eyes had that distant look that goes with intensity of feeling or of thought. Rose, in her summer dress, seemed but a streak of white against a far horizon.

"Mother well?"

He seemed to compel himself towards contact with the immediate realities of life.

"Yes, she's sleeping."

"It was good of you to come up."

"Oh, I've been making myself useful—a little."

He half turned, and stood to one side as though

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leaving room for her to pass. His manner puzzled her, and she felt herself like a child in the presence of something that she did not understand. Tom did not wish to hinder her—that was all that she could gather.

"Good-bye. I hope I shall be able to run up to-morrow."

She moved towards the gate, taking the pins from her hat as she went. At the end of the brick path Rose halted for the apparent purpose of poising her hat on the dark pile of her hair.

"Who was that, Tom?"

The real motive glided to the surface.

"That?"

"Yes; a stranger, isn't he?"

Tom looked at the bricks in the path about six paces from Rose's feet.

"Mr. Dathan's lawyer," he said quietly.

"Oh, his lawyer. Come down to investigate, I suppose? I fancy he didn't find much to grumble at down there at the Red Ghyll."

"No; it was about something else."

The hat with the pink roses appeared to need a great deal of adjusting.

"He hasn't sacked you, has he?"

"No."

"I thought you looked rather down."

"I've got something to think over, that's all."

When the girl had gone, Tom walked round the cottage to the little flower-garden that he had laid out for his mother. It was secluded by shrubs both from view and from the wind, so that Mrs. Swaine had been able to sit there in solitude with her work-basket or her book.

Tom took the seat under the bay-tree, and, leaning his elbows on his knees, sat staring at his clasped hands.

"Richard Dathan dead!" There had been love for the man in Tom's heart, and the blow had numbed him like the loss of a lifelong friend.

## CHAPTER XXIV

THE blinds were drawn at the Red Ghyll, and Mrs. Marvin, who had put on her best black dress for the day, was sitting in her arm-chair in the kitchen reading the Service for the Burial of the Dead. The girl Nellie had been weeping from time to time over her work, the easy and irresponsible tears of a sentimental child.

Footsteps came slowly along the path as Mrs. Marvin sat devoutly, with spectacles on nose. A shadow crossed the cretonne blind that was stretched across the kitchen window. Mrs. Marvin glanced up from her Prayer Book, and, drawing a corner of the blind aside, saw Tom Swaine walking across the lawn with the listless air of a man who had no heart in him for work.

There had been one of those insensate storms of wind and rain in the night—one of those storms that makes man realise how little beneficence there is in the powers about him. The gardener's life is a life of grievances, and also of stolid and eternal war. Nature shows no pity for his puny flowers, and he must retaliate on Nature, and thrust her with violence from the civilised acre that he tends. "Slay, slay, slay!" The words are graven into the gardener's heart. There is a grim joy for him when the spade-edge breaks the mole's back or when he hears the rat squeaking in the steel jaws of the trap. The slaughter of the lesser pests is a mere part of his routine. As for the birds, they suffer when the gardener owns a gun or goes round with clap-nets on winter nights. "How brutal!" the sentimentalists exclaim. Not in the least. It is but a logical develop-

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ment of civilisation, a battle between insolent instinct and the thinking, watchful brain of man.

But wind and rain can only be cursed; they cannot be trapped or shot; and the storm of the night had wrought havoc in the Red Ghyll garden. A bed of delicate pink phloxes that Tom had taken infinite pains to perfect were dashed, broken, and dishevelled. Sunflower-heads had been snapped from the stems; a tangled mass of clematis had been wrenched from the wall, and now hung dolorously over an upper window. Blown leaves and scattered wind-raff lay everywhere. In the orchard the wet grass gleamed with the fruit that had been beaten from the trees.

Mrs. Marvin saw Tom idling round the garden with the air of a man disgusted and discouraged. An ironical sun shone in the clearing sky; the wind had dropped to an insufferable snigger. It almost seemed that the elements were amused now that they had had their jeer. What consideration need they show to an insignificant biped scratching the surface of the earth with a hoe?

Mrs. Marvin left her Prayer Book on the kitchen table, and went out into the garden to talk to Tom. He was standing before one of the flower-beds that looked as though half a dozen cats had been fighting there overnight. What was the use? The whole pose of his figure suggested pessimism.

"The rain has spoiled them, hasn't it?"

Tom turned and nodded to the housekeeper.

"I suppose it doesn't matter much now." And he thrust his hands down deep into his pockets.

Mrs. Marvin glanced at the battered flowers.

"Somehow—I can't really believe it—yet——" she said slowly, with a slight shake of the head.

Tom cleared his throat.

"It do seem so strange," she continued, "to think he won't see all this again. And he so fond of the place. It doesn't seem right, does it, now?"

Tom's lips parted in an ironical smile.

"The way things are worked in this world," he

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said, "it makes a man wonder at times whether it's worth while bothering about anything. If you grow a fine flower, the wind will do its best to smash it. Pub loafers never seem to die. It's generally the best that is wiped out first."

Mrs. Marvin folded her hands over the buckle of her belt.

"It's the Lord's way: He knows," she said placidly.

"I hope He does," quoth Tom, with a touch of cynicism.

Mrs. Marvin glanced at him with mild reproof.

"Don't say that you don't believe in Providence, Mr. Swaine."

"Providence is only one way of trying to explain what we don't know."

The housekeeper was not possessed of an argumentative nature. Moreover, she was in that happy state when every small belief is cemented securely in its place like the cubes in a mosaic pavement.

"And to think that he'll never see it all again! And to think of him lying there right on the other side of the earth, while I've had the carpets up every fortnight, and the house as clean and trim as though he were coming back to-morrow."

Tom bent down and picked up a petunia that had been snapped off by the stem.

"I wonder what this flower thinks about it," he said, with a short laugh. "It must think it a profoundly silly sort of world if it thinks at all."

Tom had no heart in him for work that day. The dashed and dishevelled garden seemed but a symbol for the expression of his thoughts. A profound discouragement damped him with a fog of cynical apathy. Some vital force seemed lacking in him; the place itself appeared like a field cultivated to no purpose, with the crop left rotting in the autumn rain.

He was remembering how the dead man had schemed and imagined, and the sheer joy of the work

through those days in the spring. Here was to have been a great archway of white roses; there a bank of flowering shrubs, gorgeous in May and June. They had talked of adding the old farmyard to the garden, and of turning the pond into a little lake. Well, that was all over and done with, he imagined. Any boulder from London might come along and buy the place up if Richard Dathan's executors wished to sell.

Tom was moping in the orchard, picking up the wind-falls from the grass, when he heard voices in the garden. Mrs. Portia Hermon had descended upon the Red Ghyll to celebrate her shocked surprise in Johnsonian diction.

Tom heard her talking to Mrs. Marvin, her tones, throaty and funereal, reminding him of the many litanies he had suffered as a boy.

"So sudden—so excessively and deplorably sudden! I can assure you, my good woman, that the news came as a serious shock to me. Mr. Dathan was a gentleman for whom I had begun to conceive a sincere and deserved respect. Is the young man Swaine here? I should like to see him for a moment."

Mrs. Marvin brought the great lady to the orchard gate, but Tom, who was in no mood to be catechised by Mrs. Hermon, had forced his way through a gap in the hedge, and was standing in the ditch on the far side thereof.

"He was here a few minutes ago, ma'am."

"I thought I heard someone moving."

"Swaine—Mr. Swaine!"

Tom had a piece of grass between his teeth. He gnawed it reflectively, and kept cover.

"I cannot remain now, Mrs. Marvin. I should like to look over the house before I go."

The housekeeper toddled off with the stately and sorrowing autocrat at her side. Mrs. Hermon marched slowly and solemnly over the greater part of the house, making gracious and appropriate remarks, and heaving more than one sentimental sigh.



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From the mantelpiece of the "lounge-room" she purloined a photograph of the late Richard Dathan, and, after dropping a shilling into Mrs. Marvin's palm, went on her serious and widowed way.

Tom Swaine remained under cover of the hedge till he heard the white gate swing upon its hinges.

"I couldn't have stood the lady just now," he thought; "there's something in her voice that always makes me want to swear."

Rose Jessel was laying the tea-table when Tom came home that afternoon. Moving to and fro in the little brick-paved kitchen, with her white dress and her dark waves of hair, she might have inspired a man with the desire to make the picture permanent. The season seemed ripe for those sensuous subtleties that a woman can render spiritual when she will.

She held up a hand, smiled in Tom's eyes, and pointed to the door that led into the parlour.

"She's asleep. I'm just getting your tea ready before I go."

Tom came in and hung his hat on a peg behind the door. He could not help feeling grateful to the girl. Moreover, she was pleasant to look upon, and he had suffered from too much loneliness.

"Won't you stay and have a cup?"

She was bending over the fire of sticks, filling the teapot from the kettle that hung on the chain.

"I don't think I ought to."

"Why not?"

"Well, I don't know. I mustn't stay long, or dad will be grumbling."

She drew a chair to the table opposite Tom, and took unto herself the duties of the tea-tray. The man appeared silent and preoccupied. Rose suited her sympathy to his very palpable depression.

"Why, you're not touching anything," she said at last, with an air of frank concern. "You ought to think of yourself, Tom, a little, I'm sure."

He glanced up at her across the table. His utter

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dejection seemed to weaken the prejudices that had kept him at a distance from her for so long.

"I'm down," he said curtly; "that's the long and short of it."

"I don't wonder, with the amount of worry and trouble you've had the last month."

Rose reached across the table for his empty cup, and refilled it without asking his consent. Then she cut another slice of bread, and slipped it from the knife on to his plate.

"You've had a regular run of bad luck, Tom, that's about the truth."

He buttered the bread, and ate for a while in silence.

"Some people call it, 'fate,' " he said at last.

"Oh!"

"It doesn't matter sometimes what a man does, or how he works; things go wrong, and he's left in the lurch. Once I used to think fatalism was all nonsense, but I'm not so sure there's not something in it, after all."

He straightened his shoulders and sighed.

"You'll come to the cross-roads some day, Tom."

"And take the wrong turning, probably." And he laughed. "It's curious how, when one gets fond of someone in this world——"

He stopped suddenly, as though considering, and began stirring his tea. Rose Jessel's eyes gave a curious gleam under the dark aureole of her hair.

"We are all human, Tom," she said, tracing a pattern on the cloth with her forefinger; "we all die, and we all make mistakes. Some of us find out in time that we've been nothing more than fools."

She was watching Tom under her lashes. He looked up suddenly, and their eyes met.

"Yes, we're all of us human," he said.

He had seen Rose colour and look away. She rose up suddenly, and reached for her hat that was lying on a chair. There was an old gilt-edged mirror over the fireplace, and Rose, standing with her back

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to Tom, could watch him in the mirror as she pinned on her hat. He was looking at her with an expression as of doubt and pain upon his face.

"I don't like to see you worrying like this."

"One can't help it at times."

She turned to him suddenly, with her arms still raised.

"You know, Tom, I used to be a silly little fool. I've learnt a good deal since then. Life isn't all sunshine and giggles. No;" and she glanced at the clock. "Well, I must run half the way home, or dad will be in a dudgeon. Say good-bye to mother for me."

Tom went with her to the gate, and she gave him a slight smile at parting and a quick grip of the hand.

"Don't worry too much."

"I'll do my best."

"Come down and see dad some time. A smoke and a chat would do you good."

Tom walked back slowly to the cottage, like a man questioning his own thoughts. Was the change on the surface, or had she become what he had once desired her to be?

The sound of knocking met him as he went in at the back door. A stick had been left on his mother's bed. Tom knew that she was awake and calling for him by rapping on the floor.

He went in and drew a chair up beside the bed. The sunlight slanted into the little room, lighting up the pictures and the old books on their shelves in the corner. Tom, as he looked at his mother, was struck by a curious expression of strain upon her face. It was as though she yearned to speak to him, and felt all her desire beating against the bars of silence. He saw her lips tremble, the wrinkles deepening upon her forehead.

"Had a good sleep, mother?"

She looked at him, and appeared to be thinking.

"Anything I can get you, mother? It's about time for your milk, isn't it?"

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The grey head moved to and fro gently on the pillow. Mrs. Swaine still had the stick in her left hand. She raised it and pointed to the window.

Tom got up.

"Shall I draw the curtains?"

She shook her head.

"No? The window open wider?"

Mrs. Swaine's eyes travelled round the room. They rested at last on a bunch of roses in a china bowl on the table by the window. Tom picked up the bowl and carried it to his mother.

"Pretty, aren't they?"

She hesitated a moment, then took one of the flowers and pointed again towards the window.

Tom stood baffled.

"Rose?"

Mrs. Swaine nodded.

"Rose Jessel?"

Again she nodded.

Tom put the bowl of roses back again on the table.

"Yes, she's gone," he said; and then, slowly, as though trying to unravel his mother's meaning, "Do you like her coming up to see you?"

There was no sign for the moment. Then Mrs. Swaine pointed to the bureau, where Tom had always kept his papers.

He went to it, opened the flap and held up a sheet of paper. His mother nodded.

He held up a pen. Again she nodded.

Tom took a book, laid the paper on it, dipped the pen in the inkpot, and came back beside the bed.

"Do you want me to write, mother?"

"Yes," came the sigh.

"To anybody?"

She shook her head, and then lay for a moment with closed eyes, as though thinking. Tom bethought himself suddenly of an old copy-book of his that he had won a prize with at the age of seven. He had kept it because it had been his mother's wish. The

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alphabet on the first page would help him to win his mother's meaning.

"I'll read the letters through slowly, mother. Wave your hand when I'm to stop."

He read on to "D." It was the first letter chosen. Tom scribbled it down on the edge of the page.

He read on. "Don't" was the first word he built up from his mother's signs.

"Trust" was the second.

Tom looked at his mother and she at him. Then suddenly she picked up the rose that she had dropped on the bed and held it up before her son.

There was silence for a moment. Then Tom, wondering, saw his mother's eyes fill with tears. She stretched out one arm to him. He knelt down beside the bed, a spasm of tenderness in his throat, and held her face between his hands.

## CHAPTER XXV

WITH an August sun blazing on the flag-stones of the city, and half his clerks lounging away their holidays on sea-coast promenades, Mr. Cumberledge went out to lunch at a certain semi-historic eating-house in Fleet Street, carrying with him the *Times* and a fairly bulky envelope that had come by the morning mail. A quiet corner was always reserved for him by the head waiter—a corner where he could prop the *Times* up against a water-bottle and make his meal in peace, without being crowded by the conversation of irresponsible young nobodies.

"Good morning, John."

"Good morning, sir. Hot or cold to-day, sir? Cold? Thank you, sir. Claret as usual?"

The head waiter might have proved useful to a cartoonist in providing him with a living picture of John Bull. He was big and rubicund, with a presence that seemed to suggest that he would have shone as a bishop.

"Not taking your holiday yet, sir?" And he carefully posted the water-bottle where it would act as a buttress for Mr. Cumberledge's paper.

"Not yet, John. We busy people have to consult the convenience of our clients, eh?"

"Quite so, sir." And the round beef-red face beamed with a heartiness that should have encouraged the most liverish of patrons.

The lawyer propped the *Times* against the water-bottle, more to serve as a screen than from any desire in him to examine the Government's latest method of living down their lies. He put on his pince-nez, drew several smaller envelopes from the larger one he had brought with him, and delivered

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himself to the mercies of a lengthy and closely written letter.

More than once a flicker of amusement passed across the keen, clean-shaven face. John appeared with cold mutton, a salad, a bottle of claret, and numberless other sundries. Mr. Cumberledge folded up the letter for the moment, to resume the reading thereof when the fat waiter had deposited every imaginable necessary within his reach.

"Clever girl, clever girl! The handwriting is an excellent piece of work."

He twitched up one trouser-leg, smoothed his white forelock, and smiled in approbation.

"So she will be here in a week or two—by Jove! Pneumonia, after a drenching in the rain, and a problematical diagnosis of a congenitally deficient heart. Well, she has genius—the genius that goes towards the making of a clever K.C. So! The enclosures are to be posted on as soon as possible. Part of the psychology of the drama, I imagine."

Mr. Cumberledge helped himself a second time to salad. John's burly figure glided into polite and alert proximity. The lawyer warned him off with a blank stare.

"*Fons et origo!* All roads lead to Rome, and all a woman's ways lead—we all know where. I suppose there is some brown-limbed Paris wandering like a god among Ida's pines! I am to go down and clear the ground for her. Sisterly sentiment, the assuming of a dead brother's sylvan responsibilities. Mr. Thomas Swaine is to be requested to remain on the place as agent. Spirit of Thomas Hardy! but what sort of legal sanity am I showing in furthering this poem in prose?"

The bland and persuasive John was permitted to approach.

"Fruit and cream, sir?"

"Anything you like, John, milk-puddings barred."

"We don't work on boarding-house lines, sir, here." And the big man chuckled, having acted as

"boots" in some such establishment in the days of his youth.

Mr. Cumberledge laid the letter on the table and glanced through the enclosures that had been left open for him to read. One was addressed to Mrs. Portia Hermon, the other to Mr. Thomas Swaine.

The lawyer's intellect appeared to be keenly on the alert as he read through those two letters. They had been subjected to him for criticism, but he found nothing to condemn.

"Clever strategy, that! Subtle—very subtle—because of its beautiful simplicity. I imagine that I had better run down again to Ravenshoe in a day or two, when these two letters have been read and digested. Confoundedly fascinating, the humanism of it all. What a pretty little paragraph it would make for the *Daily Press*!"

Mr. Cumberledge dispatched the two letters that same day to their destination, with a courteous little explanatory note enclosed, stating that Miss Sybil Dathan had desired him to forward them.

Mrs. Portia Hermon read the letter from Richard Dathan's sister with sentimental yet inquisitive regret.

"MY DEAR MRS. HERMON,

"I feel I must write to thank you for the very great kindness you showed my brother during those few months that he was near you in England.

"It has all been so sudden and so terrible, and you can understand how it is with me after so great a loss. There seems a cruel irony in the thought that he should have come so far for my sake, only to die. It was pneumonia, brought on by a chill. The doctors told me, too, that the case was very complicated by some congenital form of weakness of the heart.

"My brother was conscious for some little while before he died, and spoke of you to me. He asked me to write to you, and to say that he was grateful for all the kindness you had shown him while he was at Ravenshoe.



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"I am coming to England very soon, and it is not impossible that I shall take on the Red Ghyll for the sake of my brother's memory. He had grown to love the place, and I don't like to think that it would pass to others."

"Therefore I hope before long to meet one who was such a good friend to my brother. He expressed a wish that one or two curios of his should be given to you in remembrance. I do hope that you will accept them."

"Believe me,

"Very truly yours,

"SYBIL DATHAN."

It must be confessed that Mrs. Hermon's eyes betrayed no suggestion of dimness after reading the letter. Her intellect preserved her from any such frailty.

"Really, most touching, most gratifying," she reflected. "Poor fellow, poor fellow! And he thought of me on his death-bed, and remembered the little kindnesses I had shown him. Such instances of sincerity and gratitude are rare—most rare in this world. I like the tone of the girl's letter, too, and her idea of coming back to the Red Ghyll. I will endeavour to help her to be happy. Everyone shall call on her. I will see to that."

Tom Swaine's letter was not dissimilar to Mrs. Hermon's. Perhaps there was a deeper and more pathetic fullness in its tones. The words touched Tom. They had that simple frankness that goes straight to the heart.

"So she thinks of taking on the old place." And he leant against the fence where he had been working and gazed thoughtfully over the blue hills.

"I wonder whether she is like him—in heart. He told me that they were as alike as two apples from the same tree to look at. There's something about that letter that makes me feel she's got her brother's nature."

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He crossed his arms on the fence, with an expression of grave gladness in his eyes.

"I shouldn't like to leave the old place again, with mother, too, the wreck she is. I don't see why I shouldn't work as well for a woman as for a man."

Tom went home that evening happier than he had been for many a day. New purpose seemed to have come into his life, new energy, new hope. He had no longer to face a vague and unformed future. He had been planning many half-desperate ventures in his heart of late, but with his mother bedridden every enterprise had appeared embarrassed.

Mrs. Swaine was alone when her son came home. Rose Jessel had been away from Ravenshoe at a seaside village, helping to nurse an aunt who had developed cancer, though possibly her charity was not without the consciousness of some ulterior charm. She was wise enough in her generation to realise that a man of Tom's nature needed, above all things, to be convinced. She also realised that it would not be politic for her to cheapen herself too much; for Rose knew what she knew, and her need was a woman's need.

Tom went in and drew a chair beside the bed.

"I've had a letter from Australia, mother."

She turned her face to his with a questioning smile. As is not unusual in cases such as hers, speech had come back to her, but with the power to utter but a single word.

"Mr. Dathan's sister is coming to England. She thinks of keeping on the Red Ghyll."

"Glory!"

"She wants me to stay on."

"Glory, glory!" And she smiled and nodded, for in Tom's presence alone her helplessness caused her no impatience.

"It's good to think, mother, that I may not have to leave the old place."

"Glory!" And the word had a ring of thankfulness.

Tom bent down and kissed her forehead.

## CHAPTER XXVI

ROSE JESSEL sat in the corner of a third-class carriage, a bunch of red and white dahlias on the seat beside her, and a magazine with a flaring yellow cover in her lap. The train was moving over the flats that stretched between Ravenshoe and the sea, meadows bounded by gleaming dykes, where the loosestrife and the ragwort made a glory of purple and gold.

Rose was alone in the carriage with her own thoughts; nor were those same thoughts wholly pleasant, to judge by the strained and troubled expression of her eyes. Her face had a certain covetous sharpness, a sense of suspicious alertness even in repose that recalled the unhappy faces seen in city streets. There were slight shadows under her eyes, and she appeared plumper and fuller in the figure than of old.

The train glided round a sharp curve over the meadows, Ravenshoe on its hill drawing within view against the western sky. The towers of the castle gleamed out from the nebulous mystery of many trees. The town, with its red roofs, clambered up the hill-side from the river, tortuous, stately, the town of another age. Rose could see the sunlight playing upon the waving tops of the beech trees in the park, the wind sweeping a glitter of gold from them, and bending the purple heads of the reeds in the dykes.

She rose and lifted her bag down from the rack as the train steamed into Ravenshoe Station. Nat Jessel was waiting on the platform, wagging his sharp white beard argumentatively in the station-master's red face. He caught sight of Rose at the window

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and went forward to open the door for her, throwing a last remark at the station-master over his shoulder.

"Your blooming Radical Government ought to set up a domestic servant agency; they are liars enough—even for that. Hallo, my dear, here we are again—top side up and the corns sleeping. How's Martha?"

Rose passed her bag out to her father and picked up her bunch of flowers. She had given a glance or two up and down the platform but the man she had hoped for was not there.

"Aunt's not much changed, dad. I've got a wretched headache myself."

"Come along, then, my dear; no place like home. I've brought Tim's boy along to carry your bag. One moment——"

Mr. Jessel made a slight digression in the direction of the station-master.

"What about pigtails, Mr. Pitter?"

"What about the brewers' vote?"

"Now, come now, sir, I suppose you'd like a penny tax on every glass of beer?"

"Where's the harm, Mr. Jessel, where's the harm?"

The cobbler laid a forefinger along his nose and prepared to rejoin his daughter.

"It wouldn't pay to paint 'em that colour, would it, sir, eh? Old Joe's the man. None of your Tinkle Tinkermans for me."

Rose and her father passed up the straight road between the white fences and the lime trees to Ravenshoe town. The girl carried the flowers dangling at her side. She looked tired and not a little cross—facts that Mr. Jessel's sharp eyes were not long in noting.

"I reckon you've been doing a bit too much, my dear," he said, with a keen but kindly glance at his daughter's face.

"Very likely. Aunt has to keep to her bed. And there are all the children to scramble about after. They've nearly pulled my clothes to bits."

"My word, didn't the house fall in?"

"Don't tease, dad."

"Young Kate's come home for a month, hasn't she?"

"Yes; but I don't know how she'll manage."

"Sort of young lady that goes to church in a silk petticoat and with the heels half off her shoes. I know 'em."

They crossed the bridge over the river, with the castle towering over the park lands and the quiet water.

"How's Mrs. Swaine?"

Mr. Jessel smoothed his beard.

"She was doing better for a day or two, I heard. But Mr. Mercer told me this morning that she hadn't been quite so well again."

"Has Tom been down?"

"He dropped in and had supper on Monday. Mr. Dathan's sister's coming to take the Red Ghyll. Tom's to stay on as a sort of agent."

Rose's face betrayed surprise.

"Oh!"

"It's a good berth for the lad. And he's worth it, too. There ain't a steadier worker in Ravenshoe. He ought to go right up top if he has any luck."

Rose was silent for a moment.

"I might walk up and see the old lady after tea," she said.

"You won't get much out of her, my dear. The only word she can shout is 'glory,' so they say. Good thing she wasn't left with a 'damn.'"

"Don't be coarse, dad. Who's been looking after her lately?"

"Old Mrs. Summer—'Jellybag,' as the boys call her."

And for some reason Rose frowned, perhaps because a son of that same Mrs. Summer had taken many a glass of beer at the bar of the "Golden Fleece."

Rose rested on the sofa for a time after tea, while

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her aunt busied herself in the kitchen and Mr. Jessel attended to the duties of his craft. It was nearly five before Rose put on her hat and started away with a nod to her father through the window of the little shop. She met various acquaintances in Ravenshoe High Street, two of them young tradesmen in the town, who were inclined to a complacent graciousness in their manners. Rose disposed of these coincidences in detail, and kept on her way unattended and alone.

Yet there were many thoughts hidden in Rose Jessel's heart as she climbed the steep street out of Ravenshoe town. She was a woman with a purpose—the purpose of reducing to subjection the sceptical heart of man. It was a question whether she could so blind his eyes that he would be willing to believe that she had ripened and mellowed into a creature to be trusted. Rose knew that it would never be a mere matter of sensuous passion, of a red mist of desire distorting his vision. Yet how great the need was only the woman in her knew. Even her shallow, selfish nature had been frightened into troubled, restless nights.

Three hundred yards or so from Tom Swaine's cottage the road curved sharply, a high bank on either side, shaggy with underwood, making it a place of light and shadows. Rose Jessel had walked half-way through this cutting when a man came suddenly round the curve of the road. He was running with his head down and his face half hidden by the brim of his straw hat. Moreover, he was in his working clothes, his breeches soiled at the knees, and his shirt open at the throat.

"Tom!"

He had come within three paces of Rose Jessel without so much as noticing that there was a living being on the road before him. She saw him start, lift a grim, white face to her, and swerve a little to one side.

"I can't stop—now; she's had another stroke——"

"Let me go, Tom."

He stayed in his stride for one brief moment, his face tragic in the intensity of its self-restraint.

"No; I shall get there quicker. There's no one with her at the cottage. I hadn't time to call in anyone."

He flung the words back to her as he hurried on.

"I'll go," she said, walking on down the hill.

The thoughts that passed through Rose's mind were particularly quick and clear as she walked the last furlong to Tom Swaine's cottage. Mrs. Swaine was dying; she guessed that from the keen yet stoical suffering on the man's face. Tom had always been his mother's lad. The loss of her would come as a great void, a feeling of bitter loneliness, perhaps a yearning to replace with some other love the love that he had lost. She—Rose Jessel—might be with Tom's mother when she died. It would give her a species of sacredness, a sense of nearness to him in sorrow that would avail her more than the redness of her lips or the lustre of her hair.

Rose had realised all this before she reached the cottage. The garden gate was open, the door ajar, the sun streaming in between the chintz curtains. Rose entered softly, holding her breath a moment, her eyes fixed on the squarish outline of the white quilt covering the bed.

The room seemed very shadowy and still to her. There were flowers in bloom on the window-ledge, a few magazines with bright covers on a chair beside the bed. But Rose's eyes were fixed on the grey head that rested on the pillow, on the face with drooping mouth and open eyes turned towards the window.

She went close to the bed and looked at Mrs. Swaine. She bent her head and listened, touched one of the hands that lay on the white coverlet, and then drew back with a little shudder of awe.

For a while Rose stood considering. Then she walked to the window and let down the blind, wondering at herself, despite her egotism, for feeling calm and glad.

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Yet there were other details to be remembered. She turned to the bed again, folded the two hands, one on the other, smoothed the hair and closed the eyes. Then she went into the little kitchen, opened the cupboard beside the fireplace, and searched for something that it was not difficult to find. Rose Jessel remained in the kitchen ten minutes or more. When she returned to the front room her eyes were red and suffused with tears.

Rose closed the front door and sat down on a chair by the window to listen. Interminable minutes seemed to pass before she heard the beat of feet along the road and the rapid breathing of one who had been running. She rose swiftly, and, opening the door, stood there with her handkerchief to her eyes, one hand gripping the bosom of her dress.

Tom came to a dead halt, staring at her. Rose Jessel had something of a heart, and perhaps she never forgot that look upon his face.

"My God!"

He pushed past her without another word, walked to the bed and stood looking down at his mother. Rose, silent and watchful, followed him with her eyes, awed, and perhaps touched by the muteness of the man's suffering. He stood there motionless, his head bowed, his hands hanging at his sides.

Rose went to him softly and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Tom——"

She was sobbing. The man did not move.

"Don't—take it—too heavily. It was so quiet and peaceful."

He drew a deep breath and straightened his shoulders as though waking. Yet he did not look at Rose.

Intuition inspired her at that moment. She caught one of his hands, held it in hers for an instant, and then left him alone with his dead mother.



## CHAPTER XXVII

MR. CUMBERLEDGE took train very early for Tilbury one September morning, and traversed, not to his æsthetic edification, that abominable strip of country lying north of the Thames. For sheer unwholesomeness, sordid cheapness, and offensive trade-ridden modernity, there are probably few tracts in England to surpass those Essex flats.

Everything along the "iron highway" suggested some distinct and particular stench—soap works, gas works, chemical works, black canals, a sewage farm, cabbage gardens, dung-heaps, back-yards sour with flea-ridden chickens. The very names of the stations were suited to one of the great festive highways of the Bank Holiday unwashed.

John Cumberledge, who had with him the illustrated catalogue of the Paris Salon, did not waste much criticism on the landscape. The time passed briskly for him. Before eight he was raising his hat to Miss Sybil Dathan and contemplating a figure that might have served Leighton as a model.

She was dressed in some black stuff that suggested opulence despite its colour. Her hair, somewhat short as yet, had been fluffed out with peculiar cunning, making a dark aureole above the pale, olive-skinned face.

For the moment John Cumberledge had eyed her tentatively. His subsequent smile was a tribute and a blessing.

"So—here you are."

"Yes. We have had a splendid passage."

"What about the luggage?"

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"Will you see to it for me? Here are my keys and purse. I suppose we can get a carriage to ourselves up to town?"

Within an hour they were seated in opposite corners of a first-class compartment, with the door locked by a considerate and grateful guard. There was a slight suggestion of embarrassment in Miss Sybil Dathan's manner. John Cumberledge drew out his cigar-case and reassuringly requested her permission to smoke.

"So—everything has progressed—just as you could have wished?"

She coloured slightly and smiled.

"Yes, perfectly."

"There are one or two things I want to ask you about. It is essential that we should agree in all our details."

"Of course."

He drew out the red leather notebook and rested it on his knee.

"Pneumonia, was it not?"

"Yes."

"Following a severe chill induced by neglect after being drenched by rain."

"Yes; we were staying in rooms in Melbourne together. I believe that particular lodging-house keeper left Melbourne this month."

Mr. Cumberledge scribbled a few notes and then glanced up at her with a smile.

"You were never known in Melbourne, I suppose?"

"No."

"We can cultivate a poetical vagueness if necessary. How did you contrive it all?"

"Oh, it was easy." And she described her adventures to him. "So, you see, at Sydney I burnt all the other clothes in my room at the hotel one night. At Melbourne, again, I went in for a mourning outfit." And she gave an amused and reflective little laugh.

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John Cumberledge glanced at her critically.

"What are your plans?"

"Now?"

"Yes."

"I don't want any of the Ravenshoe people to know yet that I have reached England. I have certain personal matters to attend to."

"Indeed!"

She met his eyes and smiled.

"Oh, I am not going to keep anything secret from you. Call it physical culture, if you like."

"I see."

"It may take a month or more. Madame keeps a private home of her own. She is quite reliable. Of course, if you care to visit me there, you can."

The lawyer stared out of the window a moment. They were nearing Barking, with its dreary and prophetic houses.

"You are going to this lady at once?"

"To-morrow, probably—as soon as she can take me."

"Where are you going to stay in the meanwhile?"

"At the Grand or the Cecil."

"You had better come to Hampstead."

"But—really——"

"It would be wiser."

She looked at him with a softening of the eyes.

"What an amount of bother I am giving you!"

"Not at all."

"It shall be a pledge between us. And—how are all the folk at Ravenshoe?"

The train rattled over a bridge. A mob of roofs and chimneys were filling the horizon towards the west.

"I have a letter for you from Mrs. Portia Hermon. I took the liberty of reading it. I imagine the lady will be your friend."

"For a time—at least. It will be delightfully subtle having to approach everything as though it were new and strange."

"Be very careful."

"Oh, I shall have my wits about me. And the Red Ghyll?"

Mr. Cumberledge knocked the ash from his cigar.

"The place looked as trim and sleek as though you had only been away two days."

She coloured and appeared pleased.

"A matter of conscience?"

"Yes. Reliability of character. I had a letter yesterday morning."

"Yes."

"The—his mother died three days ago."

"Mrs. Swaine?"

Mr. Cumberledge nodded. And for some minutes she seemed saddened and lost in thought.

The leading dramatist of the day has demonstrated that it is woman's fate that she should pursue and hunt the thing called man. It is an inevitable instinct in her, sometimes subconscious, often disguised in a mass of delicate and delightful sentiment. And a woman, to effect a capture, must fascinate and attract. It is useless for her to pursue the game if her face or her personality disgusts the man whom she has brought to bay. Therefore, with every refinement of man's civilised state, the methods of the woman become more complex, more decorative, and more subtle. A shiny, well-oiled body delights only the crude barbarian. In civilisation woman sweeps all the known arts to her aid.

Hence Madame Durac, and others of her profession, had many clients—women who were filled with the dread of growing old, women whose hair was not a glory and a dower, women whose complexions blushed in abnormal places. Her chambers in Craig-millar Street were exceedingly sumptuous and ornate, her "private home" fitted with every possible appliance for the beautification of the body. Madame did not advertise in the cheap press, for the simple reason that her fame had permeated those particular circles

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that provided her with patients who were wealthy. She was neither a charlatan nor an ingenious pill-pedlar, but a clever and sagacious woman of the world—a woman who had studied both in Paris and Vienna, and had little to learn from any physician in the matter of diseases of the skin.

Madame Durac was seated at the desk in her private room, dealing with a mass of professional correspondence, when her confidential maid brought her two cards on a copper tray. She was a big woman, with hair black as jet, keen eyes, and a skin like ivory. Her own physique was convincingly in her favour; the hand that held the pen was a thing of beauty and exquisite refinement from the white wrist to the clear, pink nails.

"Someone waiting, Susanne?"

"Yes, madame."

She took the two cards and glanced at them. One bore Dr. Habershone's name.

"Is the doctor here?"

"No, madame."

"I will come in a minute. See that these letters go by the next post."

Madame Durac's boudoir, where she received her patients, was an elaborately furnished little room. It was full of colour and of perfume—flowers in the gay pottery; gem-like miniatures gleaming on the walls; books in green, white and red upon the shelves; the curtains and drapings of some Eastern stuff. A curiotable by the window held a choice collection of exquisite porcelain. Two great Chinese jars filled with rose leaves stood on either side of the fireplace. Everything in the room suggested perfect taste, perfect refinement—a place befitting the philosophy of physical æsthetics.

Madame was a lady with a fine presence, frank, genial, yet stately. She could sit down before a perfect stranger and straightway set her companion at her ease.

There was nothing particularly novel in Miss

Sybil Dathan's case. As Madame Durac herself put it, it was merely a question of correcting some of Nature's minor errors.

"So you wish to come to me at once?"

"If possible."

The White Witch lifted the memorandum book that hung from her girdle by a silver chain.

"Yes, I can take you to-morrow."

"Thanks so much. Do you care for anything in the way of a deposit? You see, I am an absolute stranger to you."

Madame smiled.

"Oh, no. Dr. Habershone's name is sufficient for us both, I hope. Would you mind removing your hat a moment and letting down your hair?"

"It is rather short as yet."

"No doubt we shall soon remedy that."

Madame Durac turned on a powerful electric lamp that was concealed in a red rose made of porcelain. She took a hand lens from the table and focused the light upon the patient's upper lip. Next she proceeded to examine her hair, passing her hand through it with a slow, graceful gesture.

"I assure you the case appears to me quite simple. We shall have to touch each hair with the electric needle, but the process is thorough."

"What do you think of my figure?"

"Will you stand up a moment."

The expert surveyed her critically.

"A little more sinuosity, a little more plumpness, perhaps. Unlimited food, with a certain fixed diet; unlimited sleep; special exercises and massage. I will introduce my *corsetière* to you; the corset is everything. There is a costumier also whom I often employ; he is a real artist, but—well—rather expensive."

They both laughed.

"Vanity has an open purse; is not that so?"

Madame gave a little shrug of the shoulders.

"Why call it vanity? Why should one not have

physical ideals? The Greeks would not have forgiven dowdiness; no woman is naturally elegant or beautiful—that is to say, if she remains ignorant. I remember myself at seventeen”—and she made a humorous *moue*—“all leg and neck. I stood so.” And she put her feet apart and let her figure protrude. “See, we must be educated. You have that culture. It is a mere matter of details—and—money.”

She moved aside and rang the bell. The confidential maid appeared and proceeded to dress the patient’s hair. Madame Durac produced a box of French bonbons from a rosewood cabinet.

“Try one; they are delicious. A little fuller about the temples, Susanne. Ah, that is better. Do you know, Miss Dathan, that a woman’s face may be half ruined by a false tug or so to the hair. There are some people who always have a little fringe falling down the backs of their necks. Such a little thing, but so fatal. The whole secret is a matter of attention to details.”

The maid brought Sybil a hand mirror.

“*Comme ça*, madame?”

“Thank you.” And she blushed slightly at herself in the mirror.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

THE flagstones in the southern aisle of Ravenshoe Church were dyed with the colours shed upon them by the sun through the gorgeous Gothic windows. The oak pews with their carved finials were black in the shadow, or polished to a sheen-like silver where the light poured down into the aisle. Great rays of gold were flung through the clerestory windows of the nave. People were streaming to and fro, solemn, gliding figures, between the pews and the altar-rail, though the squeak of a new boot or the clatter of heel-plates emphasised the imperfections that cling to a cheap civilisation.

Tom had walked down to early service at Ravenshoe more because of the associations the church had for him than for any satisfaction of his own nature. That dreamy temple of Gothic mystery had gathered within its walls the sacramental life of many a home and many a generation. Tom knew the very pew where his mother had sat as a young girl. She had married her man at the Ravenshoe altar and christened her son at the old Norman font. The Swaines still owned a vault in the churchyard, one of the few prides left them in the days of Free Folly, and in that same vault Tom's mother had been buried.

Tom left the church while the people were still kneeling. His heart had remained hard despite the Sacrament; the prayers had passed over him; he had caught none of the sacrificial spirit, nor had he humbled himself before his own soul. Tom Swaine would rather have fought something that Sabbath morning than striven to wheedle himself into an emotional state in order to utter that saintly saying



that sentimental story-books know so well. He had lost the best friend that he had ever had, and he was not going to pretend that he was gratified. A most unchristian and unphilosophical attitude when judged by certain formulæ, yet it is the savage instinct of many a man to round and to defy in the hour of death's spoliation.

"I suppose I'm not built the right way," he reflected, "but I'm blessed if I'm going to thank anyone for begging the old folk and hustling them into their graves before their time."

Tom marched home, put on his oldest clothes, and turned to lift some of his potato crop in the garden. He was in a grim and solitary mood, resigned, yet not resigned—a man resenting the inevitable in life, yet knowing his resentment to be futile.

At noon he changed his old clothes, washed, put on a new black serge suit, and made a solitary meal in the brick-paved kitchen. The void in the cottage awoke in him a feeling of bitterness and of wrong. His dead mother's very gentleness appeared to inspire as by contrast the more rebellious grieving in the son. Death had isolated him, so to speak. And yet he felt stronger for being alone.

After the midday meal Tom lit his pipe, sat down at his desk in the front room and pulled out old Magnus Swaine's manuscript book. He glanced through many of his own entries in a spirit of defiant cynicism. What a mutable thing was man! And what an amount of sentimental trash he had put on record in his youth! He tore out one or two of the pages as though their contents irritated him. The act would have given Rose Jessel a prophetic warning had she seen what those pages symbolised.

Tom came across certain of Magnus Swaine's parables, whose curt candour pleased him better than patient mysticism.

"A great King sat on his throne hearing petitions.

"And a certain man came to him cringing and

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crawling on his knees, with his forehead close to the steps of the throne.

"And the man said : ' O Lord, Mighty One, thou knowest that I love thee. Yet I am a miserable sinner, and behold, I have no strength in me to do right ; my soul is an open sore ; and when I walk—I falter and fall down. Yet, behold, I love thee very greatly, and though I thief and slander and cringe, and though I am the most miserable of sinners, I beseech thee to grant that I may be given bread and wine and gold, triumph over my rivals, and all that a man may desire.'

"Then the King ordered his servants to bring him in two dogs, one a cur out of the streets and the other one of his own hounds.

"And when they had brought them the cur cringed with grinning jowl, his tail between his legs. But the King's hound came to him boldly with clear and honest eyes.

"Then the King told his servants to take the man and to whip him with whips outside the palace gates.

"' For of the two,' said he, ' the man is the greater cur.' "

On a page headed "Brevities" Tom came across a curious record. It had been taken from life in the early thirties.

"Squire Buckhurst's Prayer :

"Almighty God, I hold Thee in too much honour, and my manhood in too much respect, to come to Thee and play the sneak against my own immortal soul. I've sinned. There's the truth. I've done good. That's the truth also. The balance is in your books. Amen."

Tom made an entry of his own that day, and perhaps his mother would have smiled sadly, and yet wisely, had she glanced at it over his shoulder.

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"Life is much like gardening. Depend upon yourself. Things won't prosper for the mere asking; you must work and you must fight. God made the ant and the bee as well as man.

"Moreover, it is folly to expect every enterprise to succeed. The trend of circumstances is as much against you, man, as for you. God is wise. We are not here to make petitions, but to act.

"Do not waste your energy in dreams. And do not depend upon other people for the thing we mortals call happiness. Forget to look for it and you may find it."

About four o'clock Tom was idling round his garden, when a black felt hat and a dark-coloured toque came gliding along above the line of the closely cropped hedge. He heard the click of the garden gate. Mr. Anthony Jessel in sombre Sabbath attire appeared with his daughter between the rows of dahlias that flanked the path.

"Ha, bless my soul, you've got a fine show of flowers here; I don't believe we can touch 'em, can we, Rosie? We thought we'd just saunter up this way and give you a bit of our company."

Mr. Jessel flattered himself on his sympathetic tact and discretion. He believed in distracting people's thoughts when they were in trouble, in surrounding them with an air of energetic optimism, brisk with spiritual ozone, so to speak.

"Come in, won't you?" And Tom met Rose's eyes and glanced aside. His mother's aversion to the girl was still vivid in his mind.

"Thanks, Tom, my boy; it's warm, although it's autumn. Fullness of years, fullness of years. I shall be gone myself some day, I suppose. It's just part of life, sir—part of life."

Tom's upper lip quivered a little. Mr. Jessel's urgent familiarity had never been wholly to his liking.

"Come into the house."

The boot-mender removed his hat and crossed the

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threshold with an air of reverent respect. Rose brushed by close to Tom.

"I was just going to make tea."

"Don't you put yourself out for us."

"It's no trouble."

"Why, then, let the girl do the work for us. What's the good of a woman if she isn't useful? And"—Mr. Jessel solemnised himself abruptly with an inclination of the head—"may I say, sir, that a better woman will never step over this threshold than her—God rest her!—who passed over it last week."

Tom turned to the mantelpiece and stood fumbling for something.

"Here's the tobacco-tin," he said at last.

Mr. Jessel felt gravely for the tail-pocket of his coat.

"And her end was peace," he said, as though addressing the carpet. "That's what struck me when my poor Nan left me a widower"—which was scarcely the candid truth, for Mrs. Jessel's deathbed had been sharp and censorious even to the end.

"You're spilling the candle-grease all over the carpet, Nat," had been one of her last remarks; "you'll be the death of me with those there dirty habits of yours."

Rose, languorous-eyed and silent, busied herself between kitchen and parlour, while her father smoked and maintained a serious and appropriate discourse with Tom Swaine. He adopted a semi-fatherly tone—a tone that was not wholly agreeable to his host.

"You'll be feeling lonely up here, you know," he said, with a grave glint of the eye; "it ain't good for a young man to be lonely; it's prejudicial—prejudicial. If I might give you a little bit of advice——"

Rose let the bread-trencher slip with a clatter to the table, the loaf taking a leap and rolling away to her father's feet. Mr. Jessel cocked an eye at her and appeared to catch an admonitory flash.

"Quietly, my dear, quietly——"

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"It was clumsy of me," she confessed, hiding her eyes under their lashes as Tom glanced round over his shoulder.

"You aren't so clumsy as a rule." And Mr. Jessel stooped for the fallen loaf.

"I was just——" And she paused suddenly with a sharp catching of the breath. "There's the kettle boiling in the kitchen."

She slipped away and closed the kitchen door. Mr. Jessel deposited the loaf upon the table and then sat up solemnly in his chair, puffed at his pipe and stared at Tom.

"Bless my soul, if she hasn't run in there to have a good cry."

Tom said nothing.

"You wouldn't believe how she's taken it to heart." And he dropped his voice to a whisper. "I had to give her a good talking to yesterday and tell her to pull herself straight. It was a bit of a shock to her, I reckon." And he meditated a moment. "She's been overdoing it, too, nursing her poor aunt."

Mr. Jessel frowned hard at the carpet and then glanced up at Tom.

"But, there, I wouldn't give a raw onion for a woman who could not cry her eyes out now and again, would you, my boy?"

Tom turned restlessly in his chair. He had become suddenly suspicious of Mr. Jessel's motives. Moreover, he resented in some measure the old man's familiarity, having realised of a sudden what it might portend.

"No, I suppose not," he answered.

"A girl with no heart in her's just like a bag of bran. Moses, sir, might have walloped her with his stick, but he wouldn't have got any miracle out of her—no, not he."

When tea was over and he had taken his pipe, Mr. Jessel displayed a sudden desire to attend vespers at Ravenshoe Church. Would Rose come? Miss

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Jessel confessed to a disinclination to appear in public. She would prefer to stroll a little way down the road towards the Red Ghyll and return to Ravenshoe in time for supper. Mr. Jessel brushed some tobacco ash from his coat and glanced critically at Tom.

"Well, what d'you say, sir?"

"I've one or two things to look to at the Red Ghyll."

Mr. Jessel appeared very well satisfied.

"Then I suppose I must leave you two young people to look after each other." And he vanished with a briskness that was intended to be discreet.

Rose and Tom Swaine were left alone together in the little front room, and any imaginative person would have ventured upon sentimental conclusions with regard to the future. Rose appeared silent, dark-eyed and distraught. She had put on one of the black dresses she had worn behind the bar of the "Golden Fleece," though it had been shorn of some of its too flashy trimmings and looked simple and in good taste.

Tom sat filling his pipe and staring out through the open doorway, where the dahlias showed red, white and gold. He was thinking. And had Rose Jessel been able to read his thoughts, she would probably have left him for a more propitious season.

"Are you going out, Tom?"

He pushed back his chair and rose.

"Yes, it's about time."

She stood up also, her eyes half hidden by their lashes. She had been watching the man, and his air of reserve had misled her in the intuitive analysis of his feelings. She had thought him shy of her—an excellent omen.

"Tom."

He had turned for his hat. There was something in the intonation of that one word "Tom" that put the man instinctively upon his guard.

"I want to tell you about something——"

"Oh,"

"I think I ought to—I told your mother—before—before I went to Whitehaven. She was so good to me—and——"

Swinging round, she closed the door suddenly, and leant for a moment against it, with one hand at her throat. Tom had taken his pipe from between his teeth, and was looking at her with a slight straining of the brows.

Rose lifted her head, and her eyes met his.

"Did your mother tell you—anything?"

"Anything?"

"Before she—she died."

The smoke curled up from the bowl of Tom's pipe. The impression seized on him that he was being manœuvred into a corner.

"What do you mean?" he asked slowly.

Rose gave a little shudder, as though revolting from something within herself.

"About me."

"You?"

"Yes."

He remained silent, watching her.

"What was it?" he asked at last.

"Then she never told you." And Rose passed a hand over her eyes. "She promised that she would. It was because she—died—so suddenly. If—oh—I can't—it's no use. I left it to her because—she was so good to me, and she understood."

Tom looked at her with a bewilderment that was not without grim incredulity.

"You need not tell me if you don't want to," he said quietly.

"Don't you care?" she asked, with a tremor of the mouth.

"Care! You are talking to me in the dark."

His pipe had gone out, and he relit it with a deliberation that was not lost upon Rose. She had not moved him yet.

"You don't care, Tom; no—not a little. I thought——"

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She turned and leant against the wall, twisting her handkerchief between her two hands. Then she began to cry.

"I'll go home," she said, with a little shudder.

Tom looked at her with an intent frown.

"Why not tell me?" he asked again.

"I can't; I don't believe you would understand."

"Why not?"

"It was different; I could tell your mother; she—she understood. But you're just a man, Tom; you've never known what it is—to—have been made to suffer—just because one didn't know enough of the world."

Tom's face softened a little.

"I'm not so hard as all that, Rose. What is it? You are talking to me in the dark."

She turned to the door and opened it. The whole pose of her figure was for the evoking of pity.

"I can't; it's no use; you wouldn't understand. It was about that cad George Ramsden. He—oh—I can't. You'd hate me; you're not like a woman."

She went out into the garden and towards the gate. Tom followed her; but she fled from him as though not daring to turn and face him. It was better to leave the man with the impression that blindness and hardness of heart had driven her away.

Tom watched her disappear along the road to Ravenshoe. His eyes had been opened of a sudden. He began to understand.

"Is it as bad as that?"

He wandered round the cottage, and sat down on his mother's bench under the bay-tree. His mind was full of mingled thoughts and emotions struggling together in a fog of doubt—pity, incredulity, distrust, a sense of being lured into deep waters. For Tom did not believe all that Rose had told him. His face hardened as he realised the truth that she might be trying to reach him through the silent dead.



## CHAPTER XXIX

MR. AUBREY SANDERSON, a young gentleman-about-town who condescended to study law in Mr. Cumberledge's office, strolled out twenty minutes before his usual luncheon hour, and stood poised for a moment on the top step of the short flight leading to the pavement. There happened to be a slight film of dust upon his boots, and Mr. Sanderson drew out his handkerchief and proceeded to flap the offending particles away. The operation necessitated a certain amount of stooping, and as a natural consequence Mr. Sanderson's tie and waistcoat required smoothing to their normal neatness. The last detail that had to be attended to was the taking of a sight along the front creases of his trouser-legs, for of all the abominations that vex the heart of a man of taste, trousers bagged at the knees are the most powerful to inspire divine scorn and poignant woe.

A cab came rattling over the cobbles of the Fields, and bearing towards the place where Mr. Sanderson stood scanning his trousers, drew up at the kerb opposite Mr. Cumberledge's house. The folding-doors were thrown open, and a lady in black stepped out, giving Mr. Sanderson a momentary glimpse of a very neat pair of feet and ankles and the lace frill of a Paris petticoat. She told the cabman to wait, and, crossing the pavement, met Mr. Sanderson on the steps.

"Mr. Cumberledge's offices are here, are they not?"

The young man raised his hat.

"Ah, certainly; the ground-floor. You will see the name on the door."

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"Thank you."

She swept in with a suggestion of opulence and distinction, leaving Mr. Sanderson annotating favourably on her person. Like many young men, he flattered himself on being very fastidious in his appreciation of women. His experience, of course, was keen and comprehensive. At Cambridge it had drawn its profundities from the study of two little fluffy-haired ladies who served in two different tobacconists' shops.

"Good style that; fine figure; knows how to dress. Wonder who she is? Rather jolly being old Cumbyleg, and having confidential confabs with interesting clients."

Just as there is that ineffable and sensuous charm in one of 'Berger's waltzes, so in the real woman, the woman whom a man desires, there is that delightful sex mystery, that glimpse of the white body and the red mouth of June that create the colour and fragrance of Romance. For even if one sweeps aside the sentimentalities and the ornate hypocrisies of life, there are still left to us certain realities that fire the blood and enrich the memory.

"Well, do you approve?"

She was standing facing Mr. Cumberledge in his private room, the dull tints of his many books for a background, the Turkey carpet with its rich colours at her feet.

"My dear girl, I should hardly have known you!"

She gave a subtle little laugh.

"My own mirror surprises me. I could almost believe in Christian Science. It seems possible to become what one's heart wills one to be."

John Cumberledge regarded her with the eyes of an æsthetician. She seemed to have grown plumper, more lissome, more mysteriously suggestive in her figure. The dark hair had been caught into rich masses and waved forward about her face. As for the face, it had softened, mellowed, gained ripeness and magic. The lips were red in the midst of the

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olive skin, the lashes of the eyes longer, the eyes themselves deeper in expression. As for her dress, it had all that charm of simple opulence, those flowing contours, that subtle piquancy, that only art and gold can give. And yet, when analysed, the miracle resolved itself into an infinite refinement of details, infinite care, flawless taste.

"Really, I am sure I should not have recognised you." And he looked her over with a smile of grave approval.

"No; I have changed. I feel it in myself; it is not only in these outward things. I suppose my instincts have developed also."

He put a chair forward for her.

"So you have finished with the White Witch. I suppose the details of her treatment are as secret—well, as the secrets of the old Egyptians."

She laughed, and her eyes had a soft glitter.

"They are safe with those whom she has treated. We should not blazon our own vanities abroad, should we? Yet really it is very simple—to be fed like an Eastern odalisque, anointed with oils and perfumes, massaged, electrified, and the rest. Madame is just an—artist. It is all the difference between a daub by an amateur and a gem by Watteau. The average woman has no art. That is madame's dictum. She educates, she converts, and her costumier confirms us."

Mr. Cumberledge's keen eyes were full of intelligent amusement. He retreated to his desk chair.

"I suppose, in the words of the poet, it is a matter of 'Pay—pay—pay.'"

"Well, I consider her a public benefactress. She is of much more significance than any enterprising and rather vulgar suffragette. Women who have the real power do not go and howl at Westminster."

"No, that's true. Let us call it the Urgency of the Ugly."

He rapped his knee reflectively with a paper-knife, still astonished, despite his worldly poise, by the

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brilliant polish her surface had taken. It was no question of paint, pads, and hair-wash. The comeliness before him was as healthy as the bloom on unpicked fruit.

"Well, am I to announce your coming?"

"Yes, you might now. I am ready in every way."

"The place is ready for you, too, I believe."

She sat in silence a moment, as though considering.

"It would be useful for me if Mrs. Portia Hermon gave me an invitation for a few days."

"Yes, a good idea."

"I shall write to her, and confide to her the fact that I intend putting up at the 'Bull' before moving into the Red Ghyll. Now, the 'Bull' is an execrable inn."

Mr. Cumberledge laughed. Sybil Dathan joined him.

"That ought to draw an invitation from a person with any ordinary instinct for civility."

"Yes, I shall probably get my invitation."

Mr. Cumberledge was amused.

"Then I will write off at once to your agent. I suppose I had better join you in a state entry the first day?"

"Please, if you will. I have transferred myself to 'the Cecil.' I still have a good deal of shopping to do."

"A significant symptom that!"

She challenged him mischievously with her eyes.

"And why?"

"You may gauge the degree of femininity by the passion for shops."

## CHAPTER XXX

ROSE JESSEL had not seen Tom Swaine for a week, for it had been part of her wisdom to leave him to his own thoughts, and let the pathos of life work for her in the man's mind. Tom had been isolated, as it were, by a succession of circumstances, and nothing can be more persuasive than loneliness where the heart of youth is concerned.

With Rose Jessel it was all a question of "self" —an attempt to compromise with her "bad luck," as she would have called it. She had no doubt that she would be able to persuade Tom into marrying her, without his suspecting that she had schemed for it for many a week. There was no other man in Ravenshoe upon whom she could rely, and Tom was head and shoulders above any Ravensmouth fellow in the matter of character.

Mr. Jessel, too, was a believer in Tom Swaine.

"The man's really a gentleman when you come to look him over. He's a smarter-looking fellow when he's dressed up than half the esquires in the country. Tom's got a head on him, too. He only wants a little bit of capital or a leg-up into a good berth, and he'll come out top one of these days."

And, what was more, the Swaines had a name in Ravenshoe, a place of conservative traditions where blood counted. Tom might turn gardener to an Australian adventurer, but he was still a Swaine in the eyes of Ravenshoe. Rose could remember the time when she had flattered herself greatly because John Swaine's son from the Red Ghyll blushed boyishly when he met her in the street. True, the downfall at the Red Ghyll had sobered her satis-

faction somewhat. She had grown to patronise Tom Swaine then—less than a month after he had moved with his people into a mere cottage. Rose, like ninety-nine hundredths of her earthly sisters, was a simple snob. Selfishness and snobbery are seen on the same stem, and with Rose Jessel it would have been difficult to decide which shoot showed the greater vigour.

But when a week had passed, and no chivalrous being had appeared to offer to set his broad shoulders between her and the world, Rose Jessel grew restless, and less sure of the situation she imagined that she had created. Like the commander of an army pledged unwillingly to Fabian tactics, she began to wonder what that enemy—man—might be contemplating on the other side of the hill. A reconnaissance in the direction of the Red Ghyll appealed to her quickening impatience.

It was a brisk afternoon in October when Rose left the park lands, with the gorgeous colouring of their beeches, and made her way towards the Red Ghyll.

Finding both doors of Tom's cottage locked, she held on towards the farm. A telegraph-boy riding a red bicycle passed her on the road, and, glancing back over his shoulder, grinned amiably at Rose.

The boy was on his return journey before she reached the big pond, with its willows. The telegram had been for someone at the farm. Rose guessed as much, and stopped the boy as he came racketing up to her, knees out, mouth open.

"Do you know if Miss Dathan's at the Red Ghyll yet?"

The youth dismounted by the pedal, and stood staring at Rose.

"Don't know, miss."

"Did you take the telegram there?"

"Yes, for Mr. Swaine."

Rose passed on, casting about in her mind for some means of getting at Tom without giving him

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the idea that she had come purposely to see him. The difficulty appeared to solve itself, however, as she came to the gate closing the upper end of the spruce avenue. Tom was at work there, planting several young cypresses behind the thorn hedge. His coat hung on the bough of a tree, and from the breast-pocket protruded a yellow envelope.

Rose walked past the gate, looking studiously in the other direction. She was fairly sure that Tom would see her, and it was equally allowable for her to have overlooked Tom. He had been turning earth up out of a planting pit as she passed, and Rose had noticed that he had stopped work for a moment. She inferred that he had seen her. Very probably he was putting on his coat to follow. She gave a half-glance over her shoulder, but the road was empty—a most unflattering stretch of bleak macadam.

Rose walked on for another hundred yards, trying to convince herself that Tom had not seen her pass. She turned again, and strolled back towards the farm, catching as she neared it the sharp strokes of Tom's spade.

A motor-car came down from Ravenshoe as she approached the gate. Rose turned aside on to the grass and watched the car pass with a whirl of autumn dust. When the noise died down a little, she heard again the steady thudding of Tom's spade.

"Drat the man!"

Her pride would have to go, unless she were willing to walk back without a parley.

Approaching the gate, she stood looking down the avenue. Tom had his back towards her. She waited for fully a minute, and then lost patience.

"How hard we're working!"

He turned rather slowly, and looked at her over his shoulder.

"I was just taking a peep over the gate. I didn't see you at first."

Tom told the truth.

"I saw you pass—five minutes ago."

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"Yes, you may have done." And the inference angered her.

Tom looked at the sky.

"Fine day for a walk. I have to get these trees in before dusk." And his spade went to work again.

Rose watched him awhile, reading into his attitude a meaning that brought a sharp frown to her face. He could not be particularly eager for her company if he could satisfy himself with so paltry an excuse.

"When are you coming down to have a chat with dad?"

Tom worked on.

"We're rather busy here just now. Mr. Dathan's sister comes next week."

"Oh, does she?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you want to make a good impression."

She was wondering what had happened to the man in one short week. Surely they had been as near to each other in the contact of their confidences as two mortals could well be! Did Tom Swaine remember anything of what she had said to him? Had he taken her seriously? His pose baffled her; it suggested nothing but a mere acquaintanceship.

Rose felt her heart chilled, despite her impatience. It was the ego in her that was frightened and aroused.

"You're not coming home just yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, I suppose I must be moving."

Tom paused a moment with one hand on his spade. Then he turned, picked up one of the cypresses, and, lifting it into the hole, spread the roots out carefully, and pushed some of the earth back with his foot.

Rose could have smitten him with her fist. He was hurting the "self" in her, and perhaps he knew it.

"Well, I won't waste your time, Tom; it's valuable, no doubt."

"Oh, are you going?" And he half turned, one hand still holding the cypress steady.



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"Yes. Good night. I'm sorry I made such a silly fuss the other day. We women are silly fools—at times."

He looked at her keenly, as though trying to read her thoughts.

"It's all right," he said vaguely.

"I was rather upset. I haven't been well lately. But I won't bother you with my little troubles."

Tom stood holding the tree, the light from the west playing upon his face. It was stern, tense—the face of a man compelling himself to something that was not easy.

"We are friends, Rose," he said slowly. "You were very good to mother——"

"Don't mention it!"

She snapped the words out with a vicious thrilling of the heart.

"Good night."

"Good night," he answered.

And she turned back towards Ravenshoe with a white and angry face, the pride in her trembling for the moment over the consciousness of loneliness and dread.

Tom stood staring at the pile of brown earth beside the cypress. His features had relaxed a little, and his eyes were sad.

"It makes a man feel a beast!"

He turned suddenly, walked to the gate, but mastered the impulse ere it had carried him farther.

"What would be the use?" he thought, moving back again, and stretching out his hand for the spade. "No, I couldn't! It wouldn't mend it—in the end."

## CHAPTER XXXI

"WHAT colour, what charm !"

"I am glad you are registering so favourable a first impression."

Rudyard's fly had climbed soberly from Ravenshoe town, to rattle downhill towards the deeps of the great pine-woods about the Red Ghyll. Miss Sybil Dathan and Mr. Cumberledge leant back against the faded cushions. Mrs. Hermon's carriage was to have met them at the station later in the day, but a woman's whim had carried Mr. Cumberledge southwards by an earlier train.

He swung the white gate back upon its hinges, and held it open for her, looking in her face the while with a significant keenness.

"Call for me here at three o'clock," he said to the driver of the fly. "Well, is it sufficiently picturesque ?"

She stood a moment looking about her over the hills and valleys, purpled with pines or dashed with the gold of autumn oaks.

"A dream country. I am quite ready——"

"You are sure ?"

"Yes."

Letting the gate swing back, he went with her down the avenue of spruces to the house.

"I should like to see the garden and the orchard first."

"Would you ?"

"How well-kept everything looks ! I wonder if the apples are all in yet ?"

They passed round the garden, where sunflowers, monthly roses, autumn daisies, and montbretia were

still in bloom. The big beds before the house were gorgeous with chrysanthemums. Here and there in odd corners nasturtiums licked the ground like flame. The grass had been mown for the last time that very morning. Neither scythe nor mower would touch it till the following spring.

Sybil Dathan took the path that led towards the orchard.

"How splendid those pine-woods look!" she said to John Cumberledge, who followed at her heels.

Splendid, indeed! Mrs. Marvin's emotions were not equally exalted. She had heard voices, and had taken a peep from an upper window. Yet even her curiosity was dwarfed by mild alarm.

"My gracious, if it isn't Mr. Cumberledge and the lady! And the kitchen ain't clean, and the carpet's up on the stairs! Nellie! Nellie!"

She bustled below, unfastening her rough sack apron as she went, and declaiming inwardly against inconsiderate and over-punctual people who travelled by early trains.

The girl Nellie was sweeping the back-kitchen, her hair none too tidy and unadorned by a cap.

"My patience, they're here!"

"Lor', Mrs. Marvin!"

"They're gone round into the orchard. We must get the stair-carpet down. If it isn't just vexing! And you looking like a little sweep!"

"Dispatch" was the watchword of the moment. The girl dropped her broom, seized on a roll of stair-carpet that had been brought in after being beaten, and, stumbling up the stairs with it, kept her hold upon the free end, and let the roll uncurl itself by the law of gravitation. The method had the advantage of being expeditious. Mrs. Marvin appeared with her bosom full of stair-rods, like Winkelried at Sem-pach claspings Austrian spears. Five minutes of strenuous tugging, smoothing, and exclaiming saw the stairs clothed and in their right mind.

"There! Put the two mats over the loose ends;

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we can tack them down later. You'd better go and tidy yourself. I'll see to the kitchen."

And Mrs. Marvin showed as much energy as Mrs. Partington with her broom. As for the back-kitchen copper, it proved exceedingly sympathetic over the crisis in receiving and concealing certain unwashed crockery and an assortment of dirty cloths.

Sybil Dathan and Mr. Cumberledge had passed on into the orchard, where there was still much late fruit to be gathered. Many of the old apple-trees were heavily laden—golden pippins, red duck's-bills, ribstones, emerald "cookers," and russets, with a blush of maroon under their rough skins.

"If you are fond of climbing——"

She caught Mr. Cumberledge's eye, and laughed.

"Oh, I dare say I shall climb some of them in private. There is plenty of gathering to do yet."

"Yes. It is extraordinary how some of these old trees bear."

A big white basket standing under a tree beside a ladder whose upper rungs were hidden by foliage betrayed where some one was at work. A smaller basket came down laden at the end of a line, and was deftly emptied on the grass by a second string fastened to the side of the handle.

"Ingenious, that!" said Mr. Cumberledge.

"Calculated to save a great deal of running up and down."

There was a suggestion of movement in the midst of the apple-tree. A bough was bent aside, and a man's sun-browned face looked down at them from the dome of leaves and fruit.

"Good morning, Swaine. We are here early."

Tom came down the ladder without hat or coat. And yet, in contrast to the average Arcadian, whose costume usually leaves an impression of patched trousers, soiled and slovenly shirt-sleeves, and a frayed tie trying to climb above an equally frayed collar, Tom Swaine had the look of a man whose work was a recreation rather than a necessity. A

bluish-grey shirt, open at the throat; brown breeches, fastened with a leather belt—not much distinction might be credited to such trifles, and yet they seemed part of the man's personality, and not an assortment of contradictions flung together without agreement.

"Cheating the birds and the wasps, eh? Here, Miss Dathan, is your trusty henchman and adviser."

A semi-playful attitude seemed the only one suited to the occasion, and Mr. Cumberledge adopted it with instant tact. Tom, who was in the predicament of having no hat to lift, looked straight at his patroness—and blushed.

"So this is Mr. Swaine. I heard a great deal of you from my brother."

Her poise suggested melancholy memories. She held out her hand to Tom, and then drew a little apart, watching his face for any betrayal of recognition. He had given one glance at her—a glance that had left him with an impression of wistfulness and womanly charm. The resemblance had not struck him as anything so very remarkable—a conclusion which goes to prove how far a few feminine details may blind a man and render him no critic.

Mr. Cumberledge hid his alertness behind a contemplative stare.

"You have plenty of fruit here, Sybil. We had better have a look over the whole property, and review the cows and chickens."

"It all has such charm. You lived here once, did you not?" And she looked at Tom.

"Yes."

"For many years?"

"My people farmed here for some generations."

Tom found himself colouring again under her eyes. He had intended to insert a "Miss," but the shop-girl title seemed out of place. Instinctively he found himself comparing her with her brother. She appeared taller, more lissom, richer, no doubt because she was a woman.

Mr. Cumberledge pulled out his watch.

"We might have some lunch first."

"Yes; I haven't seen the house yet. I wonder if they can manage to improvise a meal?"

Tom did not feel himself justified in answering for Mrs. Marvin in the matter.

"I had better go up and see, sir." And he glanced at Mr. Cumberledge.

"Anything will do. You see, we took you all by surprise. Eggs, a salad, and some fruit."

"We can guarantee that from the estate, I think."

Tom marched off to the vegetable garden, and filled a basket with lettuces, herbs, and the last cucumber from the frame. He found Mrs. Marvin flurrying round the kitchen, and thanking Heaven for each moment's reprieve.

"My patience! why couldn't they come by the proper train? What's that you've got there, Mr. Swaine?"

"Miss Dathan is wondering whether you can get them a little lunch."

"Lunch? Goodness me! Why, there's nothing in the house but an end of cold mutton. Why can't they go and lunch at Mrs. Hermon's?"

Tom saw that the little woman needed reassuring.

"Miss Dathan said some eggs and a salad would do. We've got fruit, and I suppose there are such things as bread and butter."

"Oh, well, they mustn't grumble."

"She doesn't look like grumbling. Have you got the fire alight?"

"A bit of a spark in the kitchener. If ever a woman were careful of the coal——"

Tom smiled.

"I'll get some wood in, and make you a fire in the back-kitchen in five minutes."

"You're a real Christian, Mr. Swaine." And she vanished into the passage, calling "Nellie—Nellie!"

Very possibly the lunch was long in coming, but the Ravenshoe fly arrived for Mr. Cumberledge before

that gentleman had finished his cigar. Miss Dathan was reducing Mrs. Marvin to amiable subjection in the rooms above by admiring the neatness and cleanliness that she discovered everywhere. Mr. Cumberland had to call up the stairs :

"I am afraid I must desert you. The carriage is waiting for me."

She came down to him, and glanced at the watch she wore on her left wrist.

"Why—three o'clock ! How the time has flown ! "

"I must be in town by seven."

"It was so good of you to come at all ; I know what a busy man you are."

She walked with him up the avenue to the gate.

"You can manage—all right ? "

"Do I look panic-stricken ? "

"Not in the least."

"I shall survey ' the estate ' before going up to Mrs. Hermon's. I almost regret having to go there at all."

"Oh, nonsense ! she was so attached to your poor brother."

And they both laughed.

Tom, who had returned to his apple-gathering in the orchard, was officially summoned by the girl Nellie.

"The missus wants you up at the house."

He followed her without a word, something within him revolting instinctively against the vulgar intrusion of that one word "missus."

"I want you to take me round the farm."

She was standing at the porch, and Tom lifted his cap by way of assent.

"You will find some of it rather wild——"

"Yes, I know ; it was my brother's way. I am afraid I am as fond of wildness as he was." And she sighed.

Tom led the way through the orchard to where a slip-gate opened upon a sloping meadow. The path ran under great gnarled firs. Beyond the sleek green

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of the grass-land the woods rose with towering pinnacles towards the blue.

"How splendid!"

She paused a moment.

"I can understand my brother loving the place."

Tom lifted the slip-gate back. He had started the pilgrimage in some embarrassment. Her manner helped him, with its frank and mesmeric sadness, its graciousness that gives the true woman an atmosphere of sweet humanism tinged with a sacred aloofness.

"Mr. Dathan's death was a blow to me," he said, looking across the meadow; "he was more than an—employer."

The word grated upon both of them. Tom wished that he had said "master."

"You were friends, I know; he told me."

"He helped me a great deal."

"Did he?"

"Yes. And there are not many people whose advice we are willing to take in this world."

They walked on into the woods, where the bracken was turning gold and bronze under the tall trees.

"I was sorry to hear about your mother."

Tom glanced up sharply.

"Mr. Cumberledge told me." And she could see that he was moved. "You must have felt it—and the loneliness."

"Yes, it was the loneliness; a man only realises it once or twice in his life. All these woods——"

"Are mine? How grand they are!"

"We are near the fence—now."

"Who has the land beyond?"

"Mr. Pinkney."

"Mr. Pinkney? What is he?"

"Oh—just a gentleman."

She smiled despite herself. There was so much unconscious irony in those few words.

The sun was well into the west when they came back through the orchard. Tom had found himself



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talking with more ease than he had imagined to this tall and rather stately woman with the dark and watchful eyes. He remembered how months ago he had taken that same path with her brother, and the impressions that he had received were similar, and yet more subtle.

"I have my brother's watch for you. He wanted you to have it."

Tom thanked her. The words he used seemed to him very crude and clumsy.

"It is with my luggage at Mrs. Hermon's. I am staying there for the first few days."

"Yes." And he opened the garden gate for her, feeling the charm of her unaffectedness, and that courtesy that betrays no self-conscious cult of caste.

Tom's mind was full of first impressions. The whole atmosphere of the Red Ghyll had changed for him with the new presence—this fresh individuality that had something in it that he had not touched before.

"I wonder whether she will care for the life here," he thought; "strangely like him, but—I suppose she's handsomer. If I shut my eyes I could almost fancy that her voice was his."

## CHAPTER XXXII

A WOMAN in the sulks is not the most cheering of companions, even when she has a legitimate grievance against the world, and Mr. Anthony Jessel's good-nature began to rebel against his daughter's sullen temper. Nat Jessel was no fool. He had a quick eye, and the knack of reading deep into the middle-class characters that made up the middle-class life about him, and he was something of a cynic with regard to middle-class morals. He had noticed many changes in his daughter, and his observations had not conspired to flatter his self-respect. Moreover, her moods had become intolerable, and a man is never so much roused as when the comforts of his corner in life are interfered with.

"Where's your tongue, Rose? What's the matter with you? Aren't you well?"

She had cleared away supper, a meal that had passed in sulky silence, and was standing on the hearthrug staring at the fire. Her father was filling his pipe from the old brown jar in which he kept his favourite shag.

"Got the mopes, eh?"

Rose gave an impatient shrug of the shoulders.

"I wish you wouldn't stare, dad."

"How d'you know I'm looking at you?"

"Can't I feel it? You're always watching me. It's enough to make one lose one's temper."

Mr. Jessel completed the filling of his pipe, deposited the brown jar beside his chair, and felt in his pocket for a box of matches.

"You needn't be so sharp with me, my dear," he said, "though I can tell you a plain truth: you've been turning the milk sour for the last fortnight."

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He lit his pipe, smacking his lips as he puffed out the smoke.

"What's the matter with you? We don't get jaundice for nothing, do we?"

"Why can't you let me alone?"

She slipped back into a chair, picked up the day's paper, and began to twist the pages to and fro with irritable verve. Her father watched her, his forehead puckered into an intent frown.

"Look here, Rosie, I've got some sort of right of property here, haven't I? What's been putting you about? Haven't things gone quite straight?"

She crumpled the paper upon itself.

"I suppose we're not always in a mood to talk."

"That's as it may be. We haven't seen Tom much lately, eh? What's the lad doing—getting a swelled head?"

Rose gave her father a sharp flash of the eyes.

"It's no business of mine."

"Quarrelled?"

"Who?"

"You and Tom Swaine."

"What have we got to quarrel about?"

"That just the point, my dear."

The girl made a pretence of having discovered some interesting paragraph in the paper. She half turned her back on her father, so that her face was in the shadow, the light from the lamp falling upon the page. The intent contraction of Nat Jessel's brows grew still more marked.

"Wait a moment, my dear; just put that paper aside, will you?"

It was the dry, hard tone her father's voice assumed when he was inclined to show temper. Rose did not move.

"I want to have a talk with you, my girl. I've noticed something I don't like—the last week or two. And there's nothing like two people understanding each other."

"Oh, indeed!"

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Her eyes grew a little scared, but she still kept them fixed upon the paper.

"What's between you—and Tom Swaine?"

"What? Oh, nothing much——"

Mr. Jessel drew hard at his pipe.

"You mean that! Tom's straight enough fellow. I'll tell you one thing, my dear: I've been thinking of that flash cad, Ramsden, who was about with you so much in the spring."

There was a sudden quivering of the newspaper, further turning of the girl's back upon her father.

"Why can't you mind your own business, dad?"

"Ain't my daughter's business my business, and if not, why? Look here, Rosie, if you've got anything on your mind, why don't you give your father a chance?"

"What do you mean?"

Her voice was sharp and a little shrill. Mr. Jessel held his pipe by the bowl in his right hand, and leant forward in his chair.

"You haven't got any mother, my dear, and perhaps I haven't been as careful as I ought to have been. Just you turn round and look me in the face."

She obeyed him in contradictory fashion. Nat Jessel pursed up his mouth.

"You won't tell me anything, then?"

No answer.

"Well, I shall just have to ask you a straight question."

Five minutes had passed; the old clock was ticking away quietly, while Anthony Jessel lay back in his chair, his sharp white beard resting on the lappets of his coat. Rose was standing in the middle of the room with flaming face, inarticulate, defiant, yet trembling in every limb.

"I think you had better go to bed, my dear."

The dry, hard voice exasperated her. She turned, and looked back over her shoulder as she reached the door. "I can look after myself; don't you trouble."

Her father stared at the fire.

"Have your own way," he said curtly, "only don't blame me for doing my best."

Rose went to her room with burning face and a heart full of fierce and manifold emotions. She had been driven in upon her last defences, so to speak, and, womanwise, her anger had flamed up over the humiliation she struggled not to feel. Nat Jessel was a hard man under his air of brisk and waggish cheerfulness. He was the last man to be trusted with the handling of a woman rendered viciously sensitive by spiritual anguish.

Rose Jessel threw herself down upon her bed with a fierce sense of resentment against her father and the world at large. The old man's dry and searching questions had exasperated her the more because she realised that he had guessed the truth. A delirium of self-pity took possession of her thoughts. A mere child in many ways, lacking much self-control, undisciplined, too pitifully vain, she had no power near her, either in herself or in the heart of a true friend, to give her that steady sympathy that may mean everything at such a crisis. She was in one of those desperate and unreasoning moods when the instinct of the moment is to inflict pain in return for the pain suffered.

Why should she be made to suffer? What right had life to take on so bitter and maddening a meaning? No one cared. There were people who might help her, and they would not. Why, then, should she consider them? Why should she not rise and compel them to care?

Was there not Tom Swaine? For some inexplicable reason her resentment singled out the man for its chief victim. She remembered how he had once been hers, and the recollection seemed to add malice to her anger. He was playing a part, was he! He had no mind to show her any sympathy or consideration. Perhaps she, Rose Jessel, might find something to say to him that might persuade him to repent of his selfish indifference.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

TOM SWAINE was disliked by a certain section of the population of Ravenshoe—namely, by the younger men who had their various “clubs” and their gatherings in the local pubs. He was considered “an unsociable and stuck-up devil,” who appeared to have no inclinations towards bawdy talk and betting, and who did not respond to the charms of politics and beer.

Yet anyone who knows something of the undisciplined nature of the young male in the average town has but the greater respect for a man with a clean mind. He is, it must be confessed, a somewhat unique production, but all the more refreshing when he is found. Tom Swaine’s unpopularity with the Ravenshoe youths was the sincerest compliment they could have paid him. If he did not like either their mouths or their manners, the fault was hardly his.

There was not an atom of real snobbery about the man; it was simply a matter of instinctive refinement, of a love of cleanliness in life that was part of his very nature. Tom had too much of that earnestness, that inevitable sincerity, to trouble to humour things he did not honour. Though he had preferred his home life, the woods, and his books, to the gossip of the street-corner and the bar, his virility had not suffered, as he had proved on the face of more than one bully. It was simply that he did not conceive it necessary to his manhood that he should use foul language and talk away the honour of half the girls in the town.

No one is more quick than a cultured woman in

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reading the lines of a man's character. She seems to feel by intuition where she may place her trust and where she must hold herself aloof. Nothing is more repulsive to her than the suspicion of unmanliness in honour, nothing more appealing than the knowledge that she can trust.

Tom was at work one morning in the old apple-tree nearest the house, the wind swaying the boughs to and fro so that the tree strode beneath him like a good ship under sail. The leaves were falling, drifting away with each swirl of the wind, to be like so many pieces of gold on the orchard grass. The man could hear the sound of a piano being played as he sat perched on a bough with his basket hooked beside him. The music drifted to him with a suggestion of melancholy, the breeze in the boughs breathing an underchant.

Presently he caught a glimpse of a woman's figure passing through the orchard gate. It was a figure in a plain grey linen dress, a white belt about the waist, and a band of black velvet about the throat.

She came and stood under the tree where Tom was working, her dark hair shining in the sunlight about her face.

"Can I be of any help?"

He looked down at her with an air of slight embarrassment.

"I shall be done before long, Miss Dathan."

"It must be so slow."

Her frankness disarmed him, though he was not wholly at his ease.

"Shall I empty the basket? It will save you coming down each time."

"I don't see why you should do my work, Miss Dathan."

"Oh, I like being out here in the sun and wind."

The place was hers, and Tom obeyed her without demur. He lowered the basket to her, and she emptied its load out on the grass.

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"Be careful not to bruise them."

She had a view of Tom's grave, sun-tanned face looking down at her from overhead.

"Or they won't keep?"

"No. And we ought to get a good price for the pick of them by Christmas."

The basket disappeared again amid the branches, and Sybil, after arranging the apples in a big hamper that Tom had brought out from the storehouse, found herself a seat in the low fork of the tree. She felt it perfectly possible to be at ease with the man if he would only consent to admit that they were on the same plane of culture. Yet these two baffled one another with a species of self-conscious reserve. Mistress and man, employer and employed, neither could forget that the woman's money passed weekly into the man's pocket. They clashed in this: that Sybil was always striving to expel the fact from Tom's consciousness and her own, while Tom made himself remember the courtesy of distance he imagined that she might claim.

To tell the truth, he was more at ease when she left him to work alone than when she seemed moved to follow in the steps of her brother who was dead. Between man and man the case had been very different. Sybil herself had soon been compelled to acknowledge the greater complexity of the situation.

The basket came down to her again, and Tom watched her lift the apples out one by one.

"How beautiful they look fresh from the tree!"

He answered with a thoughtful "Yes."

"I suppose you are always learning something here of the life in the woods and the fields?"

It was as though she were trying to make him talk, to gain his confidence, and dissipate a sense of shyness and reserve.

"One is always learning something new."

"It is all so fresh and real. What strikes one in England so much is the greenness and the fragrance of everything."



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"Oh?"

"A contrast to some of our Australian scenery; and to South Africa, too. They strike me as arid, melancholy, and thirsty. There is something so liveable about English scenery."

He drew up the basket again with an indefinable feeling that it was amiable of her to talk to him as she did.

"I have never been out of England."

She glanced up with an air of interest.

"Have you never felt 'the draw' of strange lands?"

He was silent a moment as he gathered fruit.

"Oh, sometimes. But, then, when one has a living to earn——"

"Yes, I know. Travel is often a selfish recreation, sometimes a mere piece of snobbery. People like to talk of where they have been; it sounds superior and impressive. And yet there is a good deal to be gained in the home life."

"Oh, no doubt."

"It settles the character; nor need it narrow one's outlook."

He gave a short and characteristic laugh.

"Any man can be something of an astronomer," he said.

"Yes, that should keep anyone from being narrow."

Tom relapsed into silence, as though the prerogative was hers to initiate any conversation that she desired. It was this passivity, this irreproachability, that had begun to baffle her. She understood its meaning perfectly, and perhaps respected him the more.

"Do you know, I was going to ask you a very silly question."

"Oh?"

"How many apples there are in a bushel. Sensible, is it not?"

She laughed and glanced up at him.

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"It depends on the size of the apples, Miss Dathan."

"Most probably. By the way, I want to find some of that creeper with the red berries. You told me the name of it yesterday."

"Bryony?"

"Yes, bryony."

"There is plenty in the lower hedge."

"Is there? I want some for my vases." And she rose abruptly and moved from under the tree.

Tom turned a moment, and watched the figure in the grey dress dwindling amid the apple-trees. Then he seemed to remember himself of a sudden, and set to work steadily on the boughs that were as yet unstripped.

When the mistress of the Red Ghyll had gathered her bryony, she came back to the apple-tree with a great garland of it in her hand. The expression on her face had changed in those few minutes. It seemed cold, thoughtful, and reserved.

"I shall want the trap, Swaine, this afternoon, at three."

"Yes, Miss Dathan."

"You might send word to Thomas's boy. He can come with me and look after the pony."

She passed on towards the house, leaving the apple-gatherer to such thoughts as the inconsistencies of life suggested. To the man there was much that was baffling in her personality. Still, as he reminded himself gravely, her moods, and whatever they might mean, were no legitimate concern of his. Nearness betokened illimitable distance to him, whatever graciousness she might sometimes show to the man she paid. And yet Tom could not help but think of her without wholly realising, perhaps, how subtly he might be betraying his inner self. Her personality interested him, perhaps because he found himself contrasting her with her brother.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

A MAN of the world may tell you that no one should have illusions after the age of thirty, for then the stage is reached when the mind is used instead of the emotions. And yet there are those who refuse to accept the advantages of a well-ordered cynicism, and even cultivate sentiment instead of attempting to make life obtusely and conveniently selfish. Women are the most inveterate idealists, save in those few cases where their own cleverness runs away with them, and they think themselves into pessimism by the force of an unhappy intellect.

Now, when Rose Jessel came to the Red Ghyll one morning and sneaked in by the farm gate with the intention of seeing Tom, she almost walked into Sybil Dathan's arms, a coincidence that was far from pleasing to Anthony Jessel's daughter. She came to an abrupt halt, with a sulky gleam in her eyes that betrayed impatience.

"I want to see Mr. Swaine."

The two women regarded each other with something between curiosity and veiled mistrust. Rose Jessel's air suggested that she was ready to be impertinent upon the smallest provocation.

"You want Mr. Swaine?"

"Yes." And the tone of her voice added: "What business is that of yours?"

A faint colour overspread Sybil Dathan's face.

"You may find him in the garden."

"Thanks. I suppose you don't mind my intruding."

She assumed a pert and assertive independence, though her face had a white and strained look. It

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was the pathetic and hard-eyed bravado born of a grim necessity, the expression that one meets with on the faces of women in great cities.

"Shall I tell Mr. Swaine that you want to see him?"

"Please don't trouble. I can find him myself."

"Oh, as you like." And she turned aside towards the orchard, leaving Rose Jessel her liberty to proceed.

A woman is wondrous quick at registering impressions, and there are certain emotions that she cannot suffer herself to feel with dignity. There may be something repulsive in her curiosity when her more sacred instincts are involved. The meaner thoughts are so ever ready to run clamouring into the best of hearts. The more sensitive the personality, the more keen the repulsion and self-hate.

Sybil had recognised Rose Jessel, even though she had seen her but once or twice in the months that seemed so distant. Nor had the knowledge of the girl's power upon the past been ever absent from the elder woman's consciousness. Yet from the sudden contact between them there arose a feeling of vague yet powerful disrelish. The girl's hard-faced and half-impertinent air boasted an assertion of ownership and authority.

There are moments in life when we are moved to despise ourselves for the very instincts that plead in us for expression. Perhaps it is the sensitive dread of a possible humiliation that drives both men and women to turn with cynical scorn upon themselves. There is so much pride in us, so-much hatred of appearing cheap and ashamed even in the mirror of our own souls.

Sybil Dathan drifted into some such mood that day as she wandered down into the pine-woods with nothing but her own thoughts to keep her company. It was a momentary revulsion against herself that had seized on her, a rebellion of her womanly pride against something that might seem sordid. A woman

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is never flattered by imagining herself in rivalry with one whom she instinctively despises. Self-shame seizes on her, as the consciousness comprehends that many things that she has treasured in her heart may have become suddenly cheapened and robbed of their personal mystery. There is something essentially vulgar and revolting in the very thought of certain forms of competition.

It was past noon when Sybil turned homewards again, with the wind souging in the tops of the firs. Mist drifted over the hills, and the grass was wet with dew; the dead bracken a rich bronze, as often after a heavy rain. Here and there leaves fluttered sluggishly from an oak or a beech. There was no sparkle in the landscape. The atmosphere seemed sodden and inert.

She caught sight of Tom Swaine as she crossed the orchard. He was piling weeds and rubbish for the purifying breath of autumn fire. As she neared him there was an indefinable something in the pose of his figure that inspired in her a fresh sequence of impressions. An hour ago she would have avoided the man with a feeling of restrained pride. The mood had changed in a moment. She altered her direction slightly, so that she should pass him on her way.

Tom had not seen her. He was standing quite motionless, leaning on the handle of his rake, his eyes fixed on the flames that were climbing through the mass of hedge-clippings and weeds. A cloud of smoke drifted through the boughs of the apple-trees.

"Not a very good day for a fire."

He turned, so that she saw his face before it lost the expression that she had surprised. It betrayed to her an impression of sadness and grim resolve, as though he had come through some ordeal of the spirit.

"No. There ought to be more wind."

He let the rake fall, and, taking a fork that stood

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upright in the grass, lifted the pile of rubbish so that the air could get to the red core beneath.

"We shall have rain before long. I thought I would get rid of the stuff to-day."

He seemed constrained, distraught. Sybil was wondering what had passed between him and Rose Jessel. Her feeling of repulsion had vanished since she had caught that glimpse of the man's stern and troubled face.

"It must be nearly one o'clock."

Tom pulled out the silver watch that had belonged to his father.

"Half-past twelve."

"Thanks. These autumn days make one hungry."

She passed on towards the house, with the pungent smell of the fire following her. Tom watched her till she reached the gate, and turned to his work with the air of a man whose thoughts were none of the happiest.

The mistress of the Red Ghyll went up to her bedroom. The first thing that greeted her was a full-length portrait of herself in the pier-glass by the window. She stood motionless a moment, gazing at her own reflection, as though asking a question of herself.

An incident connected with the social side of life provided her that afternoon with further reflections upon the anomalies of life. John Pinkney, Esq., of Beechlands, and his sister came to pay their first formal call. Mrs. Hermon had issued an edict through the neighbourhood, testifying to the fact that the new owner of the Red Ghyll was in every sense a desirable and decent neighbour.

John Pinkney was a smart little man, with good teeth and an eternal smile. He had reddish hair, rather a narrow vulpine face, and legs that seemed specially designed for riding-breeches and gaiters. The sister was a larger edition of the brother, with pronounced freckles and a somewhat strident voice. Her favourite costume appeared to suggest that she

dressed each day with the intention of following the local otter-hounds. There was generally half a dozen dogs at her heels, and when she paid a call her "lambs" were not forgotten.

The first warning Sybil had of the coming of the pair reached her in the sound of a delirious yapping and barking in the direction of the drive. Glancing from her window, she saw a borzoi take the gate at a bound, to be followed by a gruff and cynical little Aberdeen, who insinuated himself under the bottom rail, and proceeded to sniff and snarl suspiciously at his surroundings. A black retriever next appeared upon the scene, and immediately commenced a friendly frolic with the Russian, in the course of which he was careful to roll on a bed of young wall-flowers that had been planted out for the spring. The Pinkneys themselves arrived under the escort of a fat and respectable old spaniel.

Miss Nan Pinkney's whip cracked as she entered the gate.

"Boris! Cæsar! heel, there—heel! Scottie, you little—— Come off that bed!"

The happy family seemed inspired to make a bear-garden of the place.

"Confound the dogs, Nan! You might have left them at home for once."

"Oh, all right, Jack; they'll quiet down in a jiffy. Just give Scottie a rouser with your stick."

Boris and Cæsar were leashed up in the porch, Miss Pinkney fastening the borzoi's lead unconcernedly to the bell-pull. The Aberdeen and spaniel accompanied the callers into the dining-room, where they made straight for the sofa, and were ejected under protest.

"Lie down, Scottie, you little brute! Oh, how d'you do, Miss Dathan? I must really apologise for the dogs; it is such a business giving them proper exercise."

Sybil accepted the situation with an amused smile.

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"I think everyone is fond of dogs; I am looking about for one myself."

She saw her visitors seated, and showed her complacency by enticing Scottie into her lap.

"So you are looking out for a dog, Miss Dathan?"

"Yes. What breed would you recommend?"

John Pinkney and his sister opened their mouths simultaneously in an enthusiastic yet contradictory chorus.

"If you want a good watch-dog——"

"Say a first-class sporting animal——"

"There is nothing to touch an Aberdeen——"

"If you take my advice, an old English setter, old-fashioned, but keen as mustard."

"I dare say we can provide you with a puppy. Minto, Scottie's husband——"

"You must come and see our kennels, Miss Dathan. At the last show at Ravensmouth my bull-terrier Termagant——"

"Jack dear, let me get in a word——"

"Oh, all right! I was only going to tell Miss Dathan about Termagant——"

"Well, we can't both talk at once, can we, anyhow?"

Sybil glanced from one to the other with a gravity that was admirable under the circumstances. Scottie was looking up into her face with serious and sentimental eyes.

"Dogs are such companions."

"The very best pals, Miss Dathan. I should just like to tell you a yarn or two——"

"If you want a real genius among dogs, I'll introduce you to Minto. He's——"

"Hallo, Nan! What's all that confounded din?"

Boisterous commotion had arisen in the porch. The bell began to ring violently and spasmodically, as though some irritable person were very much in a hurry.



"Bless my soul, Nan, if you haven't tied one of them to the bell-pull! Excuse me, Miss Dathan; I'll just go and quiet them down."

She laughed good-humouredly, and John Pinkney decided, on the promptings of a first impression, that the Australian girl had fascination.

Tea arrived. Scottie sat up and begged for cake, while his master and mistress kept up an incessant competition in their small-talk, as though they themselves had caught the spirit of their kennels at feeding-time. At all events, there was no stiffness, no embarrassing pauses. The hostess's one responsibility was to sit still and listen.

Tea being over, Mr. Pinkney expressed a polite desire to be conducted round a portion of the estate. After running the gauntlet between the two dogs in the porch, who seemed inspired by affection to put their forepaws on everybody's shoulders, they proceeded round the garden and the outbuildings, where Scottie gained a moment's joy in chasing the stable cat.

John Pinkney appeared to approve of the whole establishment. He had sundry suggestions to make—suggestions that his unfailing smile robbed of too flagrant an officiousness.

"Who have you got working for you, Miss Dathan?"

There was an almost imperceptible tightening of her lips.

"Oh, Tom Swaine."

"The gentleman gardener! A very decent fellow—a trifle too clever and independent. It's in the breed, you see."

"His people lived here?"

"Oh, for generations. They were quite worthies in their day. Young Swaine's father was quite the old gentleman. The poor old beggar couldn't go with the times."

"It always seems to me rather sad when the old families are stamped out."

John Pinkney shrugged his shoulders. His parental grandfather had made a fortune in leather.

"We have to take new blood, Miss Dathan, to keep the country alive. The Swaines and such folk had their day. It's the way the world works, I suppose."

They passed into the orchard, where Tom was still at work pitching thorns on to the fire. An early dusk was setting in, and the flames, licking through the clippings, were breaking into a brisk flare. The light played on Tom's face and figure as he stood, fork in hand, with the smoke drifting away among the trees.

"Sturdy bit of goods that." And John Pinkney nodded in Tom's direction. "If you sent the man to a good tailor, and groomed him up a bit, he would look quite the gentleman."

A curious smile hovered about Sybil's mouth. There was a slight suggestion of irony in the expression.

"So many of them degenerate in the country." And Miss Pinkney flicked her switch. "It's a pleasure to see a man with square shoulders and a straight back."

They passed close to Tom, and he lifted his cap to them, with a momentary glance that seemed to include the whole party.

"Giving them a taste of perdition, Swaine?" And John Pinkney nodded with good-natured patronage.

"Yes, sir."

Sybil Dathan's face seemed to catch a sudden glow from the light of the fire.

Tom stood leaning on his fork when the mistress of the Red Ghyll and her visitors had left the orchard. There was something in his attitude that betrayed a silent questioning of the hard facts of life. The glare from the fire silhouetted his face and figure, while the smoke drifted about him with a movement akin to mystery.

As for Sybil, she felt tired in the eyes when her

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visitors and their dogs had gone. The last sound that came back from them was John Pinkney's thin and characterless voice calling Boris and the retriever to heel. It was impossible for her not to draw an instinctive contrast between man and man. The right of patronage was a strange thing. It seemed to depend so largely upon the possession of a cheque-book and a visiting-card.

## CHAPTER XXXV

ANTHONY JESSEL sat in the dusk, with the firelight playing upon his white beard and sharp, fresh-complexioned face, and the smoke from his pipe floating away in the gloom. The sound of weeping came from a far corner of the room, where a woman's figure showed indistinctly in the shadows—a figure prone upon the sofa, with face turned to the wall.

Nat Jessel removed his pipe from his mouth and expectorated into the fire.

"It's no use you carrying on like that, my girl," he said curtly. "I've told you my mind. I don't see I'm to blame, because I felt pretty sure Tom Swaine had told me the truth.

"I'd take Tom Swaine's word before the word of any man in Ravenshoe, the parson included. He's straight—all through. Pity you didn't keep him when you had him, though he wasn't Mr. Swaine of the Red Ghyll any longer. It was a mean trick you were trying to serve him. Don't you see the right and wrong of it yourself?"

Her father's voice had assumed its dry and un-hurried temper. The Puritan in him was in the ascendant; and even where his feelings were concerned, he was not a man who believed in mollifying the truth.

Rose lifted her head and looked at him in the dusk.

"I suppose you all want to be rid of me. You don't care——"

"Now, that's not true, my dear."

"Oh, isn't it? You are all so respectable, and smug, and selfish, that's what it is. I'm not going

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to crawl for anyone's pity. You put that in your pipe and smoke it ! ”

“Don't you talk like a little fool, my dear ! ”

“That's all the sympathy you've got to show me ! ”

“I reckon I've some cause to feel a little sore, haven't I ? ”

Rose raised herself on the sofa, and sat crumpling her handkerchief between her hands. Her face was stiffening from angry emotion into sullen reserve.

“I can look after myself, dad,” she said, a little huskily. “I don't want to upset your precious self-respect. You are fonder of it than you are of me.”

“That's a lie ! ”

“Oh, just as you please ! ”

She rose and moved towards the door, picking up a candle from the table as she went. Nat Jessel did not trouble to hinder her.

“Good night.”

“Good night, my dear.” And he reached for the tobacco-jar on the stool beside his chair.

We often suffer ourselves to be misjudged in our relations towards others, perhaps from the inherent cussedness of our mortal pride. Neither side will hoist the white flag, or surrender an inch even to gain an ultimate victory. Mr. Anthony Jessel and his daughter had come to some such obstinate deadlock. The old man, with his laconic sarcasms and his unemotional anger, had driven the girl into the most sullen of moods. It was not that he was not fond of her; on the contrary, this trouble of hers had proved to him that she held a larger part of his heart than the old cynic had imagined. But Anthony Jessel was not the man for “slobber.” If he felt worried and sore on the girl's account, he was not going to soften her chastisement by appearing ready to play the stage-parent.

“I can't let her shift for herself, though she has made a pretty mess of things. If only the old woman had been here——”

He picked up the poker, and worked the fire into a blaze, his sharp face keen and intent.

"As for that cad, I'd like to have a few swipes at him with this bit of metal. Old fool! I ought to have known what sort of animal it was. And yet—it isn't much good trying to get change out of the chap. If we were in the States, and not this molly-coddle country, I'd put a bullet in him, and call it quits."

Rose had gathered quite a false impression of her father's attitude towards her in her trouble. She went to her bedroom that night hating him, as youth hates age at times when it appears in the part of mentor and of tyrant. The old man's cynical bluntness had raised all the primitive Eve in her. She was in a mood to accept any mad scheme that should enter her rebellious head.

Unlocking a drawer in her dressing-table, she drew out a crumpled-looking newspaper, and sitting down upon the bed, put the candle on the pillow. Running parallel with the sporting news upon one page was a paragraph headed "Football Flakes." These cheap jottings contained a piece of information that Rose had been on the watch for during some few weeks.

"Local admirers will be interested to hear that Georgie Ramsden is playing full-back for Brandon United this season. Some critics say that George could give points to any Derby ram. May he be saved for the many grand 'saves' he made last season! Our club is richer for a 'little piece of paper.' Good luck, Georgie, though you were transferred."

Rose Jessel did not go to bed that night, but after putting out the candle she sat down in the dark dressed as she was. About eleven o'clock she heard her father coming up to bed. He stopped, and listened for a moment outside her door, and even this

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little incident reinspired the daughter with the impression that he was hard and suspicious—even to the end. And yet, had she been able to see the old man's face as he stood listening outside her door, she might have realised that it was possible for him to forgive.

Rose waited till she judged her father was asleep. Then she lit her candle, and drawing a hand-bag from under the bed, proceeded to fill it with a few necessaries, and such trinkets and jewellery as she had. Her face had sharpened into a sullen and purposeful alertness. She had made up her mind, and the decision seemed to give her courage, steadiness, and daring.

Nat Jessel was a sound sleeper, and Rose, walking shoeless down the short passage to her father's room, listened for some minutes at the door. Very carefully she turned the handle. The door was unlocked, and she stole softly into the room. The old man's breathing betrayed that he was sound asleep, and Rose, with her heart going at a canter, moved across the room to the chest of drawers that stood by the window.

The blind was up, and there was sufficient light for her to see what she was doing. Opening one of the top drawers inch by inch, with her eyes towards her father, she slipped in a hand, and felt for what she sought. Though there was a slight clink of money that made her pause and hold her breath, Anthony Jessel never so much as stirred. Too sullen and rebellious to feel the meanness and the guilt of the thing she did, Rose closed the drawer again, and made her escape from the room without waking her father.

The prize was one of those cheap cash-boxes that are impressive only to people with tendencies towards casual pilfering. A chisel chosen from Nat Jessel's workshop soon over-persuaded the flimsy lock. By the light of the candle set upon the kitchen-table Rose had leisure to examine her spoil. One ten-pound

note, six five-pound notes, twenty-three sovereigns, and a pound or so in silver. She packed the notes away under her bodice, promising to transfer them into cash before the day was out. The money she managed to pack away into a voluminous purse. As for the broken cash-box, she left it, a cynical relic, for her father's edification.



## CHAPTER XXXVI

**DEAD** leaves, brown and gold, deep under foot; the woods growing dark and lean against the blue sky; the whir of wings; the pungent scent of a brisk November.

John Pinkney, Esq., and Captain Friend, a grey-headed neighbour, had been summoned to shoot through the Red Ghyll covers, where, since no slaughter had been made there that season, birds had accumulated from the surrounding estates. Miss Nan Pinkney carried her gun with the men, and was perhaps safer with a smart right and left than either the captain or her brother. It was quite an informal affair, with Tom Swaine acting as keeper, and a dozen youths and boys to serve as beaters. Sybil, who knew nothing of the etiquette of English sport, left the technicalities to her guests.

The guns had been popping merrily all the morning, with a brief interval for lunch. Tom, with a game-stick laden with slaughtered birds, and a cartridge-bag slung across his shoulder, followed the Pinkneys and Captain Friend, who were working the last wood in one of the bottoms below the farm. Sybil had dropped behind for awhile, tired of a sport that did not pique her. She came up with Tom in the last wood as he was collecting the dead birds from the undergrowth and bracken.

"Have they nearly finished?"

Tom looked at her, and noticed that she seemed white and tired.

"Yes, Miss Dathan. We can come back for you here if you care to wait."

She seated herself on the stump of a tree.

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"You might tell Miss Pinkney that I have ordered tea at four."

The shooting-party walked back over the fields towards the Red Ghyll, with some twenty brace of birds to their credit. By coincidence or design the coterie of four had split up into couples, John Pinkney ingratiating himself with Sybil, his sister discussing doggy lore with Captain Friend. Tom followed in reflective isolation, with his bevy of beaters straggling in the rear.

Anthony Jessel had come to the farm early that morning with cold eyes and a stiff upper lip. The manner of the girl's going seemed to have frozen up the old man's pity. Tom was the only person whom he had trusted with the truth, or with whom he deigned to talk on a matter that lay so near to his loneliness and his pride. He had not attempted to trace Rose's steps, though he had a shrewd suspicion whither her flight had tended. As for sundry inquisitive acquaintances who broached the subject of Rose's sudden leave-taking, Nat Jessel's dry tongue withered their officiousness.

"A man might think his daughter belonged to the whole town," he had said, "by the kind interest people take in her. When there is anything particular to notify, and when she marries the duke, and has her portrait in the Academy, I'll send the crier about and have it shouted round."

The old man's grim pluck kept him from so much as the quiver of an eyelid.

"The girl's safe enough," he had said to Tom, who had foreseen a possible tragedy. "I know my daughter pretty well by now. She'll take care not to do anything to hurt herself. Some day she'll swagger back in all manner of toggery to patronise the old man, and tell him she's married the biggest licensed victualler in London. Don't you worry about her, my boy; I'm not going to, I tell you that. The last thing that will happen to my girl will be for her to put up with a tight shoe. She's too careful of

herself, and too fond of her own face. Rose won't come to a coroner's jury."

But Tom's thoughts were distracted from Mr. Anthony Jessel's affairs that afternoon by the two couples who were walking in front of him. Miss Pinkney and Captain Friend were on ahead, so that John Pinkney found himself in the pleasant position of being in touch with a woman who had already piqued his inclinations. The little man, with his gun tucked under one arm, his hands thrust into the pockets of his Norfolk jacket, seemed quite ready for a serious flirtation. He stepped along with an easy, confidential air, at times walking two yards or more from Sybil, sometimes swaying so near to her that his arm touched hers. Tom had a frequent glimpse of John Pinkney's profile, with its neat moustache, smooth chin, and peaked cap sloping over a receding forehead. The conversation appeared to be wholly in the gentleman's hands. It was very rarely that Sybil turned her head to look at him.

These trivialities had a peculiar effect on Tom as he swung along, carrying a heavy cartridge-bag and a goodly load of game. John Pinkney was not a favourite of his, and the rights of familiarity that the man's position gave him had a repellent influence upon Tom. Perhaps it was the subtle waking of a new consciousness in him. For the moment at least he was conscious only of impressions, of an instinctive resentment against the intimate nearness of another man to this woman. It remained, perhaps, for the moment an impression and nothing more, for Tom cut short the temptation towards reflection by acknowledging that the matter was no business of his.

The party went into the house to tea, leaving their guns in the porch. John Pinkney turned back to launch a casual command at Tom.

"Swaine, you might give the old girl a rub over. She's a devil to rust."

His sister's voice chimed in from the privileged interior. "Jack, tell the man to have a look at

that right shaft. I thought it looked a little sprung as we came down."

John Pinkney transferred his sister's instruction, and then went in cheerfully to tea.

Tom took all the guns round to the carpentering shed, and cleaned them thoroughly, though, with a touch of significant venality, he gave more care to Captain Friend's. He was oiling and polishing the stock when the girl Nellie hailed him from the yard.

"Mr. Swaine—Mr. Swaine!"

"Yes."

"You are to harness Mr. Pinkney's horse, and put six brace of birds in the trap."

"All right."

"They'll be ready in five minutes."

Tom found himself once more a silent spectator of a life he was not expected to share, as he stood holding the head of John Pinkney's horse, and watched Sybil and her guests coming up the garden path. They all seemed merry, and in the most friendly temper. John Pinkney was chattering out the conclusion of some favourite anecdote. Everybody laughed, even the sister, who knew it as a genuine antique.

"Well, good-bye; we have had a most jolly day. You must come over to us, and return the compliment. What about next Tuesday, Nan?"

"Tuesday, yes—there is nothing else on on Tuesday."

"Shall we call it a fixture?"

"Thanks; I shall be very glad. I hope you have really had good sport."

"Oh, first rate. Up with you, Nan. Did you have a look at that shaft, Swaine?"

"It seems sound enough——"

"All right. You'll find a little bit of room on the back seat, Friend, and help us to balance. Good night, Miss Dathan. It's been an awfully jolly day."

He climbed up cheerily, and took the reins from his sister. Tom let go the horse's head and stood

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aside. John Pinkney, fumbling in his coat-pockets, brought out a couple of half-crowns, and tossed them as largesse to Tom.

The coins fell on the drive, and rolled—one of them—close to Sybil's feet. Tom stood erect, as though he had not seen the money fall.

"Good night, Miss Dathan."

There was a final lifting of caps, and the dogcart, with Captain Friend trying to look comfortable on a very narrow back seat, disappeared up the avenue under the boughs of the spruces.

Tom turned to the gate as though to open it for his mistress. His mouth was a straight line, his eyes looking into the distance.

"You had better take a brace of birds home with you," she said, wondering whether he would pick up those two half-crowns.

"Thank you, Miss Dathan, I'm afraid my cooking does not rise to game."

"Oh, I forget that. Perhaps you would like them for your friends. By the way, was that Mr. Jessel from Ravenshoe who was up here this morning? The old man looks ill."

Tom was silent a moment before replying.

"He has had a good deal to worry him."

"Oh."

"His daughter left him not long ago."

He spoke quite calmly, without any emotion in his voice, as though he were telling her what he knew as Anthony Jessel's friend. Sybil had moved on down the path, so that Tom should not see her face.

"Was that the girl who came up here to see you one morning?"

"Yes."

"Has she quarrelled with her father?"

"I can't tell you the whole truth, Miss Dathan. It's one of those experiences in life that make men cynical."

"I understand."

"It was all self with her; that's where the trouble came."

He turned abruptly down the path to the stables, with a lift of the cap and a quiet "Good night," as though he were desirous of breaking away from a subject that he had no cause to uncover before her eyes. As for the mistress of the Red Ghyll, she entered the house where the twilight was beginning to fall, and sat down in a window-seat as though under the compulsion of her own keen thoughts. Those few words of Tom's seemed to close an episode that had filled her consciousness with a species of restless self-contempt. She had realised from his manner that his interest in Rose Jessel had fallen to the dispassionate pity of a man who had outlived the glamour of the past.

Sybil still had the trivial incident of a few minutes ago before her eyes: John Pinkney's hand tossing down a tip, and Tom's expressionless and unseeing face. There had been infinite significance in that scene for her. It had reminded her of some effeminate lordling, enriched by peculating in the King's service, throwing down a couple of rose-nobles to a man who had fought in the thick of the moil at Agincourt.

The dusk was gathering when she heard the clang of the gate, and knew that Tom had gone home to his lonely cottage. Some impulse of curiosity seized her. She went out into the garden, and up the path to the gate opening out into the avenue of spruces. Looking cautiously ahead between the straight boles of the trees, she passed out into the drive, and glanced about her as though she had dropped a brooch or a ring. The two half-crowns were still lying where they had rolled and fallen. She smiled at the discovery, as though pleased.

"Why should I not like him to have pride?" she thought. "Man that he is, it is part of his best nature. It would have hurt me, somehow, if he had taken that money."

## CHAPTER XXXVII

"WELL, my dear, I consider that you should be very well satisfied. You may assume it as a compliment to yourself when I state that this corner of the county has always had the reputation of being excessively exclusive."

Mrs. Hermon had driven down to lunch at the Red Ghyll, and was carrying Sybil back with her to Ravenshoe, where there were bills to be paid and the butcher reprimanded. Mrs. Hermon and her protégée were alone in the governess-car, and the lady's conversation had for its subject Miss Dathan's reception into social favour.

"The Deverels have called, I suppose."

"Yes, a week ago."

"They are people"—and Mrs. Hermon held her head a little on one side, like a wise bird—"they are people who really claim a little too much altitude. I remember a very knowable family taking Fernfield, on the other side of the valley. The grandfather had been in the tanning trade. The Deverels would not know them, because the scent of the tanyard had lingered through two generations. It is rather a subtle incident, my dear, when people's social status is injured by the memory of a smell. I am glad you like your neighbours. John Pinkney is very popular in the county, and though Nan is a little eccentric, she is very amiable and entertaining."

Mrs. Hermon kept the corner of an eye on Sybil's face. The lady of "The Mount" was a believer in matrimony, because in her own case a vigorous personality had disinfected it of all problems.

"The Pinkneys have been exceedingly friendly."

"So much depends on one's neighbours in the country. Nan came to tea with me yesterday. She said they were so pleased to have you near them. Her brother——"

A motor-car bore down upon them at high speed, and Mrs. Hermon steered the pony nearly into the ditch.

"Detestable machines! Do you know, my dear, you must try to regard me as privileged, but I believe a certain gentleman has taken rather a fancy to you."

"Oh!"

The unconcerned, irrelevant tone was admirable.

"The conversion of a confirmed bachelor——"

"Might be considered a ribbon in my cap? Perhaps I might call myself a confirmed old maid."

Her air of amused frankness puzzled Mrs. Hermon for the moment. She summed up the situation to herself with world-wise adroitness by assuming that the more nonchalant the manner, the more serious the sentiments.

"You know, you must not mind my playfulness." And of all creatures that ever breathed Mrs. Portia would have been the last to inspire a feeling of friskiness in the mind of any male. "We middle-aged ladies like to rejuvenate ourselves by sharing in the youth of others."

Sybil was thoroughly conscious of the inquisitive alertness lurking in the angle of Mrs. Hermon's eye.

"I assure you that you shall be the first to know, should anything of that kind seem probable."

"Thank you, my dear."

"I have been here hardly three months."

"Of course. The more mature one grows, the more circumspect one becomes. I can assure you John Pinkney is an excellent fellow—a good Churchman, a staunch Conservative, sound and sensible in every way."

Sybil was troubled by an uncontrollable desire to laugh. Perhaps she appeared pensive and distraught



in the smothering of the passion. At all events, Mrs. Hermon studied her critically, and drew her own sentimental conclusions.

Sybil gained her liberty in Ravenshoe by pleading an endless round of shopping, and Mrs. Hermon jogged homewards at the tail of her plump pony. Sybil's thoughts boasted a tinge of irony as she walked the streets of that autumnal wind-swept town. The blood-red leaves had fallen from the creepers that covered many of the old houses. The wind came in gusts and eddies down narrow lanes and medieval passage-ways. A grey sky hurried above the bleak towers of the castle, where the bare boughs of the beech-trees roared and swayed.

Sybil turned homewards by the road that led past Ravenshoe Church, where yews and cypresses bent like so many obeisant fatalists. The halyards were clapping against the flagstaff on the tower. Even the great Gothic windows looked gaunt and grim, with no sun to warm their outlines with deep shadows.

Sybil had passed the gate, when some sudden impulse brought her back to the two huge yews that flanked the entry. She went up the steps into the churchyard and looked round her at the multitudinous monuments of the dead, callous and stiff amid the waving cypresses. Here were headstones lichened over till their lettering was undecipherable; here, also, those oblong masses of brick with which Georgian worthies fastened down their dear ones, as though to test the powers of the last trump. Cherubs' heads fluttered amid hour-glasses and crossbones. The very paths were paved with stones that told of those who slept beneath.

Sybil had turned into a side-walk that ended against a high flint wall half covered by ivy, when a man stepped out from behind a yew and came along the path towards her with his eyes on the stones. The burial-plot of the Swaines lay in that quiet corner, and it was there that Tom's mother had been buried.

Perhaps Sybil would have been loath to surprise him in that place had she been forewarned of the likelihood of their meeting there. It was too late for her to retreat. She saw a slight flush spread over the man's face as he lifted his eyes and recognised her. The points of a pair of grass-shears protruded from the side pocket of his coat.

They met in the side-walk with the constrained air of two people taken at a disadvantage. Tom raised his cap. He would have passed her had she left him sufficient room to escape without crowding.

"How windy it is!"

"Very."

"I have never been in here before. The old English churchyards have a kind of melancholy charm."

He acknowledged the confession with a look.

"I had nothing much to do, Miss Dathan, this afternoon. I thought you would not mind——"

The semi-apology brought the colour to her cheeks, and there was a touch of intimate impatience in her reply.

"There is no need for you to look at it in that light. We are old enough to use our own discretion."

Her words appeared to plunge both of them deeper into vague embarrassment. For the moment Tom imagined that she was indulging in irony.

"I should like to see your mother's grave."

She glanced about her with the restless air of one who feels it impossible to be silent.

"There is not much to see, Miss Dathan."

"Oh."

"It lies here, in the corner."

Sybil moved in the direction that he indicated, feeling how difficult it is at times unrestrainedly to speak one's thoughts.

An oblong patch of turf closed in with iron railings and a number of headstones ranged along one side thereof marked the last resting-place of the Ravenshoe Swaines. The grass had just been clipped

by Tom's shears. A few yellow leaves had drifted down from an elm tree beyond the wall.

In the same grave were laid John Swaine and his wife Mary. Next to them slept the poetical Magnus who had found life full of the strangeness of beauty. Some of the inscriptions dated well back into the eighteenth century; the lettering had been recut on some of the stones, and kept clear and undefaced by moss or lichen.

Sybil stood for a minute in silence with her hands on the iron railings, thinking more of what she should say to Tom than of the orthodox emotions one should feel in such a place. She had her part to play, a part more passionately vital than reflections upon the dead.

"How well kept it is! The lettering is all so fresh and clear."

She turned and caught something like a cynical smile in his eyes.

"It is the last piece of property we Swaines have left to us. I suppose it is natural I should take a little pride in it."

"Do you come here often?"

She walked back slowly up the path, with Tom following her.

"Now and again."

"Then they still allow burials here?"

"In some of the few private graves. There is still a vacancy in ours. I suppose I shall be the tenant of it some day."

"Rather a morbid forethought."

"It is only forecasting the inevitable, Miss Dathan. Sixty years hence we shall all of us be forgotten. The grass will grow, and the weather wipe out the names. The family will be dead, in body and in name. There are many such families in Ravenshoe churchyard."

His pessimism piqued her, knowing the secrets of her own heart as she did. They had reached the two great yew trees guarding the gate. Tom loitered there as though he expected her to go her own way

and leave him to his. Etiquette insisted on his walking fifty yards behind her all the way to the Red Ghyll.

"Have you anything to do in Ravenshoe?"

"No."

"Then we can walk back together."

Tom gave her a questioning look. It seemed more unconventional frankness that made her offer to walk through the streets with a hired man who took her pay. Tom knew very well that the majority of women did not parade with their gardeners or their grooms.

"What do you think of taking in the farmyard and the pond this winter? It was my brother's idea."

She had passed down the steps and paused there, her face half turned towards him as though she were waiting for him to join her.

"It will mean a good deal of work, Miss Dathan."

"You can get labourers in."

"Oh, we could do that."

He had taken the kerb side of the path, and they began their walk together under the leafless boughs of towering elms.

"It would be a good deal of expense too."

"That would not matter. I shall get you to take over the financial management for me."

Tom was trying to make the lappet of his coat pocket cover the points of the shears.

"I could draw out an estimate. Do you want a shrubbery or garden there?"

She walked on in silence, as though picturing in her mind the future effect.

"I should like to make a collection of choice shrubs, and we might have more roses. In fact, we might make a rose garden all round our future lake."

"If you would draw out some sort of plan."

"Yes. We must consider it—together."

Her woman's wit had been at work since they had left the two yews at the gate of Ravenshoe Church, though Tom—the mere man—had no suspicion of

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enchantment. Yet she contrived to dispel his atmosphere of repression, to make him forget his employed self in the real self that was so ready to take cover behind its pride. Her success had an element of picturesqueness that windy November afternoon. For the first time she seemed to steal behind the barrier of reserve, to touch the real man, and feel his life and sympathies touch hers.

They were talking of other things than the reclaiming of farmyards by the time they reached the uplands that plunged again towards the Red Ghyll. The wind seemed to have blown the fog of custom from before their eyes. A sense of exhilaration and of freedom had possession of them both.

Nor was the species of surrender she had won from him wholly unrealised by Tom. He walked home in the dusk to his cottage feeling like a man who has drunk of some magic cup, whose wine has warmed the elements of life and set the heart beating a new refrain. And yet there was some measure of perplexity in his mood, a sense of strangeness as of a new country and a new atmosphere. A veiled sadness seemed to stand watching him with mysterious eyes. The possible and the impossible were tangled together in his mind.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

SNOW had fallen heavily in the night, and the hypocritical earth paraded in the white robe of a transient sanctity. Soon after dawn the sky had cleared to a brilliant blue, with the sunlight shining on the laden shrubs and trees, and the whole landscape a thing of splendour.

Sybil was at breakfast in the long room, the sunlight pouring in, and the snow-covered lawns agleam before the windows. The room had an air of sensuous warmth and comfort. The fire, banked high in the grate, threw out rays that sparkled on the polished woodwork of the furniture. Nor is there anything more inspiring than a snug breakfast-table on a wintry morning—far more inspiring with the perfumes of its teapot than all the isles of Greece.

The girl, Nellie, appeared with raw hands and a rather congested nose.

"If you please, ma'am, Mr. Swaine wants to speak to you after breakfast."

"Ask him to come in here, Nellie."

"In 'ere, ma'am?"

"Yes, it's so terribly cold."

The girl vanished, sniffing vigorously all the way down the passage. She left all the doors open in her transit, and Sybil was able to hear the dialogue that went on at the yard-door.

"The missus says you be to come in, Mr. Swaine."

"Oh! My boots aren't particularly clean."

"No, that they beant. Give 'em a good scrub, Mr. Swaine, for the sake of the carpets."

"Have you got a broom handy?"

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"Put your foot on the step, and I'll give you a scrub."

There was the "tush-tush" of a broom at work, a few critical remarks from the girl, and the sound of hobnails coming along the passage. The mistress of the Red Ghyll was in a black morning-gown, with a white scarf over the shoulders and bosom. She had a book propped against the sugar-basin and a gardener's catalogue in her lap.

"Good morning. Come in."

The room had such a mellow and luxurious look, was so full of colour and sunlight and the glow of the fire, that Tom could not help contrasting it with the grey and cold cottage that had numbed his hands that morning before he could get the sticks to burn. The atmosphere of opulence seemed to set the woman in the black dress at a distance from him. He found himself staring reflectively at her face, and admiring its smoothness and the slight olive tint of the skin that gave it a warm, sleek, southern look.

"Pull a chair up near the fire."

Tom contented himself with a seat near the window, where the table hid his heavy boots.

"You look serious."

He met her eyes and smiled.

"There has been a catastrophe in the orchard."

"Oh!"

"Someone left the hen-house door open last night."

"And that someone was myself."

She pushed her chair back from the table, and half turned towards the fire.

"To what extent am I culpable? I remember looking in to see how snug they were; the creatures always amuse me. Then I had a hunt in the nest-box for eggs, and found a couple. And the end of it was, I suppose, that I took the eggs in and forgot to shut the door."

"We have lost about fourteen birds, and some of them those half-guinea ones, Miss Dathan."

"Stolen?"

"Just—a fox."

"But fourteen—to one fox."

"Most of them are lying about in the snow. It's the way the beast has of amusing itself. It kills—for the pleasure of it."

He was wholly serious over the loss, as a man who has worked and fought in the country must be. The slaughter of some dozen fowls may not seem a heart-breaking incident, but perhaps there is nothing that makes a countryman feel more cursed and vindictive, save three days' rain when his hay is down.

"I had better come out and see."

Tom twirled his cap.

"It is not very pleasant to look at."

"Oh—but I'll come." And she rose from her chair and went to her room to dress.

Blood and feathers in the ruffled and scattered snow; here and there a stiff bird with dishevelled feathers and twisted neck; a significant trail in the snow where Monsieur Reynard had dragged away some of his plunder; my lord of the harem and a few fluffed-up wives parading round rather nervously, and cocking curious eyes at the victims of the night.

"How utterly exasperating!"

She had caught the fever of angry resentment that wild nature raises at times in the thinking and contriving human mind.

Tom surveyed the scene in vindictive silence.

"And some of the best birds too! It was as though the brute knew I had forgotten to shut that door. What's to be done?"

"That depends."

"Depends?"

"On whether you are what people call a true sportswoman. You can send in a claim to the local Hunt, take compensation that covers half the damage done, and feel yourself a benefactress to the hounds."

"I don't feel in the least like that. Do you mean to say——"



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"A fox is a sacred beast—almost as sacred as a cat was at Bubastes. You may only kill him in one particular way."

"Then, were we to retaliate, it would be set down as a social crime!"

She broke out into laughter that had a note of malice in it.

"One of the many superstitions, I suppose! What would you do if the place belonged to you?"

Tom's mouth betrayed a certain grim sense of humour.

"What many a man does on the quiet—load my gun. The beast will probably come back again to-night."

"Well, shoot him."

Tom glanced at her to see whether she was in earnest. "You mean it, Miss Dathan?"

"Yes, just to challenge the whole spirit of the thing. Why should we keep poultry to help to feed a few gentlemen's foxes?"

She met Tom's eyes and seemed to see the humour of the situation.

"Fourteen hens, and so much heroic wrath!"

"Some of us cannot afford to laugh, Miss Dathan."

"No, perhaps not. Shoot the beast if you get a chance. I shall feel—somehow—that I have scored a point against your English etiquette."

Tom smiled. She turned to him again with an amused flash in the eyes.

"I suppose they won't cut me in public if they hear of the criminal slaughter of a fox?"

"They won't know," quoth Tom, "unless you care to tell them."

There was a full moon that evening when Tom walked down from his cottage with his gun under his arm and half a dozen cartridges in his pocket. The snow had survived the day, and the hills were white under the moon, the woods dark masses of silent mystery. There was frost in the air; the stars glittered, and the road rang under Tom's feet.

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He turned in at the white gate, and took the path that would lead him past the front of the house into the orchard. A flood of light poured from the porch with the sudden opening of the door. He could see Sybil standing there, leaning forward a little and looking out into the night.

"Is that you?"

"Yes, Miss Dathan."

She saw the gleam of the gun-barrels.

"I have some hot coffee here. Would you like a cup?"

"Thank you; I should."

"Come in a moment."

"I'll have it here, if I may; I don't want to miss our friend."

She brought it to him from the Austrian *cafetière* that stood on a low table beside her chair before the fire.

"Where are you going to wait?"

"Down near the slip-gate, under cover of the hedge. The gentleman came and went that way last night."

"If I hear the sound of a gun, I shall know that we are avenged."

Tom gave the cup back into her hands, and she heard him go down the path towards the orchard, open the gate quietly, and stand listening a moment. Leaving the door open, she went back to her chair before the fire, and picked up the book that she had been reading.

Yet her thoughts fled from the book's pages out into the moonlight and the snow. Her nearness to the man had grown appreciably since that day when they had walked back from Ravenshoe together. And yet the nearer she had drawn to him in the life the country enabled them to share, Sybil had been baffled by a barrier that threw her back upon her womanly pride. Tom Swaine was eternally the same. His quiet and unapproachable courtesy had held all deeper things at a distance. She had never been able

to penetrate beneath that straightforward, self-reliant, and rather silent surface, or to fathom even the slightest of the secrets that might be hidden beneath. It was all very honourable, very manly, very excellent, but this unimpeachable attitude of his often filled her with impatience. She had almost begun to question whether the eternal social boundary would ever be overstepped, and that Tom had no other thoughts towards her than those of a man for a woman whom he is able to respect.

Whether it was indifference and blindness on his part, or the fanaticism of reserve, she had not been able to tell. A man usually betrays himself to a woman, often when he wishes to conceal the truth, but from Tom she had been able to glean nothing. Her proper pride embarrassed her in the romance. She had far too much true womanliness to dream of suggesting to him the attitude that she desired him to adopt. They seemed poised like two stars that revolve about each other, but never approach.

Sybil fell into a cynical and despondent mood that night as she sat before the fire, scorning herself in measure for having accepted the inheritance of Eve. The intellect and the heart were at war one with another, and yet the warm instincts of her womanhood could not save her from scourging herself with subtle ridicule. Weak, impressionable fool that she was, had she not seen enough of the world, or gained sufficient mental poise, to prevent her humbling herself to a girlish superstition? If people only knew, these self-sufficient gentry of England! The thought made her flush, even in her solitude. What an inimitable comedy her vagaries might inspire! What a majestic opportunity for the cynics! A woman with two thousand pounds a year trying to persuade a farmer's son to fall in love with her, and not with great success! Most admirable fool! She put her book aside with an impulse of impatience, and sat staring haughtily at the fire.

The distant roar of a gun, the sound echoing and

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re-echoing amid the moonlit hills; the lapse of a few seconds, and then a second report, fainter and less sudden than the first.

The sounds seemed to shake her from her cynical lethargy, as a weak boy may be roused from a mood sacred to Schopenhauer by a full-handed clap upon the shoulder. She rose up, went out into the porch, and stood listening.

The only sound that came to her was a queer, faint cry, like the cry of one half smothered in the sea.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

SYBIL stood there listening, the moonlight striking down into the porch upon her face, and the night breeze swaying the boughs of the Scots firs so that they cast vague flickering shadows upon the snow. The cry had startled her with the suggestion of some mishap. Alert, white-faced, she waited with the tense air of one who knows not what secret the night may hold.

She could hear no sound of anyone moving in the orchard, and the vast silence of the night assumed an eeriness that made her shiver. Turning into the house, she took down her garden cloak from behind the passage door, and, throwing it over her shoulders, went down the path to the gate opening into the orchard. The snow lay white there under the gaunt and spectral trees, whose tops glimmered against the sky. An utter silence held. Even the frail night breeze had died and was gone.

She stood at the gate and called.

"Tom, where are you?"

Her voice rang loud and clear in the frosty air, but won no answer from amid the orchard trees.

A vague fear seized on her, an instinctive dread deepened by the cold mystery of the night. Pushing open the gate, she entered the orchard, forgetting that she had nothing but thin evening shoes upon her feet. Her long skirt trailed in the snow, till it caught on an old apple-stub and held her fast.

She rent it away, and, gathering up the folds, called to Tom again.

"Are you there? Has anything happened?"

Still the same forbidding silence that gathered an

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element of grimness as she strained eyes and ears in her alarm. Before her the snow stretched clear and white for fifty yards to the high hedge of the orchard. A bank of blackness cut the sky there, with a few stars glimmering above it, like silver arrows shot over the world's rim from the bow of a god.

Sybil went forward towards this bank of shadows, her eyes striving to pierce the impenetrable gloom thereof. She was quite close to the hedge before her ears caught something that set her heart beating a swifter measure. The sound seemed quite near to her under the blackness of the hedge. She moved towards it, stray brambles catching at her dress, the snow soaking her frail shoes.

The glint of something metallic, a darker shadow under the darkness of the underwood, a vague pattern as of footmarks in the snow. She went forward suddenly, stooping, her eyes wide with the gloom that baffled her. She had almost touched him before she fully realised what had happened.

"Tom!"

She went down on her knees, her eyes growing accustomed to the dusk under the hedge. Tom was lying there, his face half hidden by his arm, the gun under him, the snow thawed in dark patches by something that she knew for blood. For the instant she thought him dead as she knelt there, shocked into helplessness by the horror of the moment.

Action came, with a rush of blood to the heart. Sybil stretched out her hands and felt for a sign of his breathing, and, drawing the left arm from before his face, found the throb of the artery at the wrist.

She had no horror of him, though her hands came away stained from his clothes, and the snow upon which she knelt had the colour of wine. She was conscious only of a strange feeling of tenseness about the brain, a cold clear-headedness that froze her emotions for the moment into a realisation of his imminent need.

With her torn skirt gathered in her hand, she hastened back over the snow. Mrs. Marvin and Nellie were sewing before the kitchen fire when their mistress went in to them with the admirable restraint of one who knew how easily women of a certain type are scared and rendered useless.

"Nellie, run down to Ravenshoe. Bring Dr. Emmery back with you, or any other doctor who happens to be in. There has been a gun accident."

The girl had started up, and stood open-mouthed, staring at her mistress. Sybil smothered the threatened exclamations.

"At once—just as you are. It may be a matter of life and death."

The command was final, and the girl obeyed as though mesmerised. Mrs. Marvin was sitting bolt upright in her chair, stocking and darning-needle in either hand, as though she had been smitten by a glimpse of the Gorgon's head.

Sybil went into the back-kitchen, and took a lantern down from one of the beams.

"Get me a couple of clean towels, and some linen from the press, Mrs. Marvin."

The old lady jumped up with the jerkiness of a clockwork figure.

"Dear Lord! Miss Dathan, don't say Mr. Swaine——"

"Quick!"

The housekeeper took half a minute to light a candle, and then went blundering up the stairs. Sybil had her lantern lit, and, standing it in the porch, she turned into the dining-room to lift a small whisky decanter from the drawer of the Sheraton sideboard.

"Mrs. Marvin!"

"Yes, miss; I'm coming. Oh dear——"

"Throw the things down to me. That's right. I want you to go down to the Lower Lane cottages, and tell a couple of men to come up here at once. They will find me by the slip-gate in the orchard."

"Oh dear, Miss Dathan! I——"

"If you don't go, Mrs. Marvin, I shall give you notice to leave."

Picking up the lantern, with the towels and linen over her arm and the decanter in the other hand, she hurried out again into the orchard, and over the snow to the black and shadowy hedge. The prone figure moved slightly as the light from the lantern flashed upon his face. Sybil was down on her knees instantly, and trying to trickle some of the spirit between his lips.

Then, very gently, yet using all her strength, she turned him over, and put her folded cloak under his head. The truth that the lantern betrayed almost unnerved her for the moment. A great part of the right shoulder and arm of the man's coat had been blown away, exposing a blackened and shattered limb.

To put an end to the bleeding, that was the one thought that engrossed her consciousness. Taking the soft linen, she folded it into a thick pad, pressed it into the depth of the wound, and began to bind a towel over it with all the strength she had. She drew the first knot fast with a kind of fierceness, setting her teeth and straining with all her might. She saw him shudder a little, as though the sharp pain of it broke through his stupor.

Sybil's hands began to shake as she hurried to end it before he should recover consciousness. The ordeal was beginning to work its will on her, the cold, purposeful intellect weakening before the impulses of the heart.

She drew the gun from under him, and he groaned and moved as though recovering consciousness. The left hand came up with a blind, uncertain motion, and began to pull at the rough bandages over the shoulder. Sybil seized his wrist, and, putting the arm down by his side, held it there, and knelt watching his face.

His lips moved, and he awoke with a shudder of pain and a straining of the arm which she held with



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her two hands. The other arm hung in its shredded sleeve.

"Lie quiet, Tom."

She bent over him.

"Where—what is it—is that——"

"Lie quiet—you must lie quiet. We will carry you in in a minute. Dr. Emmery is coming."

He shivered and looked dazedly into her face, and then up at the sky where the moon sailed overhead.

"Are you cold?"

"Yes, a little."

She stretched out her hand for the whisky and made him drink.

"Don't lift your head. Leave it to me."

"Thank you, Miss Sybil."

"Don't talk, only lie quiet."

He looked up at her again with the look of a wounded dog.

"I've frightened you," he said slowly, as though his mind was beginning to work. "What a fool! I was pushing through a gap in the hedge after the beast, who was hard hit. How it happened, Heaven knows!"

They carried Tom Swaine on a hurdle to the farmhouse that night, Sybil going ahead to warn Mrs. Marvin of his coming. She ordered the housekeeper to light a fire in the guest-room and get the bed ready before they brought the wounded man in.

Tom, gripping his right arm with his left hand to prevent the agony any movement gave him, looked up at the sky with a face as white as the moon's. The labourers who carried him turned in at the garden gate, the man who walked first giving orders as though he were steering a wagon.

"Wo-a, wo-a! wheel him to the right, Ben."

The hurdle lurched a little, and Tom set his teeth.

"You'd have found it quicker through the yard," he said, as they tramped slowly along the path.

"'Ere we be at the porch, Mr. Swaine."

"But I'm not going in there!"

"The lady's orders."

"Can you manage to carry him in like that?"

It was Sybil's voice; she was waiting for them in the porch. The men backed and manœuvred.

"It be them posts, miss."

"Too wide? Put him down a minute."

She caught up the lantern that was still burning, and, running through the house and across the yard to the carpentering shed, brought back a saw for cutting short the pointed ends of the hurdle-posts.

One of the men took the saw; it was a slow job, as he had to work at a disadvantage.

"You had better let them carry me home, Miss Dathan."

He looked up at her, his face grey with the pain caused by the mere vibrations of the saw.

"No, I should not think of it."

"But all the trouble——"

She stooped down to replace her cloak that had slipped a little from under his head.

"It is no trouble. Do you think—I—Listen! I hear the doctor's trap coming down the drive."

They carried Tom up the stairs, Dr. Emmery lending a hand, and into the guest-room, where a bright fire was burning. Mrs. Marvin, with a face that mingled curiosity and fear, half hid herself behind the door as they bore the man in. Emmery of Ravenshoe had brought his assistant with him, a huge, rosy-faced Irishman, who looked as though he could have carried Tom Swaine in his arms. Mrs. Marvin was sent below for basins and hot water, Sybil following her to slip silver into the labourers' hands.

"Lor', miss, you do look white!"

Nellie had bustled into the kitchen, and nearly ran against her mistress in her hurry.

"Oh, I am a little tired."

"Sit down in the chair, miss, please." And she dragged a wicker chair forward in alarm.

Sybil sank into it.

"Get me a little water, Nellie."

Nellie obeyed, and put a dash of something in it from the decanter on the table. Their hands touched.

"Why, you're as cold as a corpse, miss. And, my gracious—your slippers! You've been all in the snow!"

She was down on her knees in an instant, stripping off the sodden shoes and stockings. The warmth of the kitchen fire and the touch of Scotch in the water, together with Nellie's ministrations, gave Sybil back her strength. Her thoughts were in the room above, where the two doctors were bending over the shattered arm.

The cynical self-hate of an hour ago had vanished utterly from her being. She was full of a woman's thoughts, of a woman's pity, of a shocked tenderness, and a yearning to be near to help.

"You'd better change your skirt, miss. See how it be steaming."

Sybil rose and climbed the stairs slowly to the broad landing above. In one corner, Mrs. Marvin, candle in hand, was rummaging and delving in the linen-press. She turned on hearing her mistress's step.

"Oh dear, miss, I had to put your sheets on the poor lad's bed. They were clean and aired this morning. I hope you won't mind me, miss, but——"

"That's all right, Mrs. Marvin. It was very sensible of you to remember it."

"I'll go and get these aired. They won't take long in front of the fire."

She disappeared downstairs, her bosom full of linen, and the candle quivering in her hand. Muffled voices came from the guest-room, where the doctors were with Tom. Sybil crossed the landing and stood listening, trying to gather what was said.

Emmery was speaking. A voice broke in on him suddenly, the exceeding bitter cry of a man in pain.

"For God's sake, sir, don't say that!"

There was a moment's silence. Sybil's lips quivered.

"I'm afraid there's no help for it, Swaine."

"For God's sake, sir, leave me my arm! Only give me a chance! It can't be so bad. My God, it can't be——"

He seemed to break down suddenly, as though some dread sense of the inevitable broke his courage. Sybil heard Emmery's voice, the quiet and almost husky voice of a man much moved. There were tears on her cheeks as she turned away, the bitter, passionate tears of a woman whose heart was full of sacred fire. She went to her room almost blindly, Tom's bitter cry haunting her, and filling her with unutterable pity.

## CHAPTER XL

THERE are incidents in life that light up the memory as vividly as a smuggler's torch lights up the dark corners of a cave. And there was one incident born of that November night that Sybil Dathan was never likely to forget.

That was a week ago, but the memory of it came to Sybil hourly with a species of shuddering pity. It had seemed to symbolise for her all that the man had lost—his right hand, his prowess, the pride in the labour that won him bread. She had but to think of that November night to feel her thoughts watching beside the bed of the man who had lost an arm.

Yet she had not drowned self utterly in the flooding up of her sacred compassion. There was something selfishly dear to her in having him helpless and in her power. Sometimes she railed at her own divine and passionate meanness. And yet the subtle hope remained the same, the hope that she might win her way at last through the barrier of the man's pride. Therefore her heart was full of secret thoughts—thoughts that filled even the December landscape with some of the colour and the mystery of June.

It was a Tuesday morning, and Emmery had driven away along muddy roads, the nurse had gone to her room for a few hours' sleep, and Mrs. Marvin, descending the stairs with a breakfast-tray in her hands, met her mistress on the stairs.

"How is he this morning?"

Mrs. Marvin halted, supporting the tray between the wall and her own protuberant person.

"Terribly down, miss; he doesn't say much, but you can see it in his face."

"I'm going to take in these magazines."

"Perhaps he'll brighten up a bit, miss, if you can get him to talk."

Sybil crossed the landing, and knocked at the door of the guest-room where Tom lay.

"Come in." And the voice was toneless and without life, the voice of one who was in the deeps.

A fire was burning brightly in the room, and the whole atmosphere thereof was one of luxury and warmth. There were books on the table beside the bed and hothouse flowers in the vases. The curtains had been drawn well back from the casements, as though to welcome the vague gleams of the winter sun.

Tom Swaine was half lying, propped against pillows, with a coat thrown over his shoulders and a book open in his left hand. His face had a thin and haggard look—the face of a man who has suffered more, perhaps, in the spirit than in the flesh. His skin had lost its bronze, and his eyes appeared tired, as though he had been reading late into the night.

"I have brought you a few magazines and papers."

His face brightened transiently, only to return to its expression of deep depression. There was something pathetic in the mute tiredness of the eyes.

"Thank you."

"What is the verdict this morning?"

"Favourable progress. At all events, the doctor seems satisfied."

He spoke with a bitterness that he could not hide. Sybil had laid the magazines upon the bed. She went and stood before the fire, leaning one elbow on the mantelpiece. She understood how the man was suffering, with his thoughts fixed upon a future that appeared blank and pitiless.

"Is there anything else we can do for you? Any-one you would like to see?"

The fingers of his left hand were turning the pages of the book that lay upon the bed.

"I have everything I want. I am giving you too much trouble as it is."

She lifted her head and looked across the room at him.

"You must not think of it in that way."

"I can't help it, Miss Dathan."

"Do you think we regard it as a trouble?"

"You have been very good to me, all of you." And his hand still turned the pages of the book.

Sybil stood there gazing at the fire, her heart feeling the pathos of this strong man's humiliation. Tom's eyes were fixed on her momentarily with a questioning melancholy. She looked very comely to him, her face warmed by the firelight, her dark hair waved back from her forehead, and the fine outlines of her figure set off by the simple black dress that she wore. There was something in the expression of her face that puzzled him. Her eyes seemed to have caught an inward radiance that was both mysterious and alluring.

"I suppose you know that I am responsible for all this?"

She spoke without looking at him, her chin supported by her hand.

"Responsible?"

"Yes."

He closed the book, his eyes remaining fixed on the cover thereof.

"There seems to me only one conclusion"—and he paused with a grim smile—"and that is that one should have nothing to do with unlucky people."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, it is an old proverb. By the lore of the stars some of us are born to be failures. Some people call it fatalism. I suppose I ought to be a fatalist, judging by my experiences."

She remained silent a moment, staring at the fire.

"Why talk about failure?"

"It is a sort of truth that fate seems determined to bring home to me."

"Well?"

"I used to think that I could only be hurt through others, if you know what I mean. This—has changed all that. It is difficult to work one's way with two hands; it is harder still with only one."

Tom's eyes were turned towards the window, or he might have seen the rush of emotion that streamed up into her face.

"You forget that I hold myself responsible."

"For what, Miss Dathan?"

"This accident. You could claim from me by law—if necessary."

Tom's eyes gave a sullen gleam.

"It was my own fault," he said curtly.

"That is a debatable point."

"Do you think that I could ask you to pay for my carelessness?"

Her eyes met his, and she saw the undaunted and obstinate pride tightening every line of his virile face. Fate might lop the right arm from his body, but it could not cleave away his obstinate self-respect.

"I don't think that you are quite fair to me."

She spoke very gently, her eyes once more turned towards the fire.

"Cannot you realise that I have some feeling in this matter? It is not a mere question of law or of duty."

He did not answer her for the moment, but stared out of the window with his tired and melancholy eyes. That there was temptation for the man Sybil could well imagine. Yet she felt by instinct what his reply would be.

"I'm afraid I'm not made to be a pensioner, Miss Dathan."

She frowned slightly.

"Surely there is no shame in taking what would gladly be given. Besides——"

"If I have no moral right——"

"Besides, you can still manage for me here. We can have a couple of men in to work."



"To do what I ought to do?"

"No; I have other plans. I shall need more men, and you—as my agent. I can well afford it."

He had opened the book again, and was turning over the pages, his lips trembling a little.

"You are too generous to me, Miss Dathan."

"It's merely fairness, not generosity."

"Don't think that I'm not grateful, that I don't feel it; but I can't—I can't somehow—take what I can't earn. I suppose you think it foolish pride. But it's the way I'm made. That's all I have to say."

She turned from the fire, and, going to the window, stood with her back towards Tom, so that he thought for the moment that he had lost her pity. There was a mist before her eyes, but of that Tom knew nothing. He saw only her tall, straight figure and the proud poise of her head.

"Think it over," she said at last.

"I'm grateful, Miss Dathan; don't think——"

"Yes, I understand."

She heard suddenly the clatter of a horse's hoofs coming down the drive, the click of the gate, and then the sound of footsteps on the gravel. A man's figure passed beneath the window, topped by the outline of a big tweed cap. The bell rang. She seized her chance and left Tom to his thoughts.

Sybil found John Pinkney standing on the hearth-rug before the fire, cap, gloves, and crop on the gate-legged table, his person sleek and immaculate, from polished gaiters to gold-pinned stock. The little man was almost welcome to her at that moment, his very complacency giving a steadier poise to her emotions.

"Hope I'm not in the way? How's the man Swaine? Thought I would ride over and inquire."

She passed him the cigarettes, and sat down in her favourite chair before the fire.

"He seems to be doing very well."

"The fact is, you've been awfully good to him."

"Oh, I don't know—a mere question of human feeling."

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John Pinkney lit a cigarette, blew a smoke ring, and then gave her a glance that was intended to be infinitely shrewd.

"Most infernal nuisance for you, this, just when these Radical rogues have made us responsible for any fool's clumsiness. Of course you are insured?"

"Well—no, I had forgotten."

"What! You don't say so! That's ugly. Don't think me officious, but what's the man's game? I might be able to help you with a little advice."

She looked at Mr. Pinkney's neatly gaitered legs and up past his brass-buttoned waistcoat to his amiable and consequential face.

"You mean——"

"The man may sue you, you know. Most immoral, of course; all his own damned clumsiness. Some of these gentlemen haven't any sense of shame. It's grab what you can in this world."

"I have offered him compensation."

"You have?"

John Pinkney's face expressed chivalrous reproof.

"Yes; it seemed only fair."

"My dear Sybil, allow me to differ. You must not allow sentiment to enter into these matters. You don't know these fellows as I do. It doesn't do to show one's hand, or they think they can bluff and run up the price."

"Then you would advise me——"

"Not to offer a penny till you have made him understand that he ought to be jolly grateful if he gets three farthings."

As for Sybil, she let him wax oracular, telling him nothing of those almost sacred words that she had drawn from Tom. The little man appeared delighted to squander his wisdom in her service, referring to the enemy as "the man Swaine," "this fellow," "decent sort of person in his way," and the like. Perhaps John Pinkney imagined that he had impressed her because she accepted his statements with a species of smiling patience. He was utterly innocent

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of the suspicion that he was affording her a fascinating study in contrasts, and that he was being mocked by his own words.

The little man talked for half an hour before he departed with an expressive grip of the hand and a gallant twirl of the cap. Tom, in the room above, recognised the voice as John Pinkney took his leave.

"You don't mind my calling you Sybil, do you? The other thing sounds so beastly formal."

"It does, does it not?"

"Just think over what I have said, won't you?"

"Of course."

"Nan may be over this afternoon. She wants to show you a new dog."

## CHAPTER XLI

THE dusk of a December day was falling, and Tom sat before the fire with the empty sleeve pinned across his coat, like the sleeve of a veteran who has lost a limb in battle. Beside him on a table were his pipe and tobacco-pouch, books, a bowl of Christmas roses, and the gold watch that Richard Dathan had left him as a remembrancer.

To Tom the house seemed dark and silent as he sat in the deepening twilight, with the wind moving restlessly in the Scots firs without. Even the frost-bound high road gave no ring of hoofs, no echo of human haste. It was an hour when the winter dusk wraps the fields in a profound sadness, and when a man yearns for crowded streets, the glare of lamps, or the voice of a friend.

Tom was bending forward with his eyes fixed on the fire, his face white and intent against the shadowy background of the room. He was thinking of many things—of the strange unexpectedness of life, of the grim realities that haunted him, the ghosts of the past, the wraiths of the future.

He turned suddenly in his chair, as though a deepening sense of loneliness emphasised the gathering darkness to him. His eyes fell upon the flowers in the bowl and the books upon the table. Possibly they launched him on some fresh passage of thought, for he remained motionless a moment, with his eyes fixed upon the flowers. Presently he stretched out his left hand and touched them, almost with the gesture of a caress.

The coals settled in the grate, and the blazing log that had been supported by them sank with them,

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throwing up a cloud of sparks. The shadows wandered vaguely about the room. The long tendrils of a creeper, swayed by the wind, tapped and rustled against the window.

Tom lay back in his chair with closed eyes, and pressed his temples between thumb and fingers. It was as though he were trying to see something more vividly, to recall past flashes of life that had all the tantalising tenderness of a dream. He let his hand drop at last to the arm of the chair, but still lay back with closed eyes, his face alternately in light and shadow.

An old clock on the landing struck the hour with a hoarse whir of wheels. Tom opened his eyes as though the sound had wakened him, and leant forward again, gazing at the fire.

"How wonderfully good she has been to me!"

He drew a deep breath and bowed his head.

"If only things had been different!"

Again there seemed to rest with him one long pause of saddened thought. It was as though he were some exile looking back in imagination upon a lost land, feeling an inevitable destiny holding him in bondage.

The frosty road gave him the sudden sound of wheels. He straightened in his chair and sat listening, while the chime of hoofs came through the dusk, and the light from the carriage-lamps threw the shadows of the casement frames upon the wall of the room. Life seemed to wake suddenly in the deeps of the old house. Doors opened and closed. Voices answered one another. To Tom alone the loneliness appeared keener and more real.

"She must have had a cold drive."

Footsteps on the path, voices in the porch, a sound of home-coming, a sense of light and warmth. Tom sat staring at the fire, his face softened by a gleam of listening tenderness. He heard her voice, and yet its dearth deepened the sadness about his heart.

Had he not been born in this old house, and yet

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how little he felt himself a part of its present life. It was all hers—the charm and fragrance thereof, the books, the flowers at his elbow, the very coals in the grate. What did it mean to him? A passionate grieving of his pride; a vague, instinctive striving of his manhood to thrust the truth aside, and rush out into the dark. The poignancy, the helplessness! It was all hers—all, even that secret which he could not betray. Nothing seemed his, save his own obstinate self-will.

He heard Sybil's voice upon the stairs.

"You have forgotten the lamp here, Mrs. Marvin."

"Mercy me! so I have, miss."

Her hand was on the handle of Tom's door.

"Why, you are all in the dark here, too!"

Tom rose from the chair, his figure a blur against the light of the fire.

"Mrs. Marvin, will you please bring up a lamp?"

"Yes, miss; I'm just coming. These dark evenings fall on one all of a heap."

Mrs. Marvin entered as torch-bearer, with the more stately figure following in her wake. She was wearing a jacket of sables, clasped at the waist with a belt of silver filigree work, and a spray of white flowers over her bosom. Tom looked at her as a man looks at a woman when his eyes tend fatefully towards her, yet with some measure of awe. She seemed to have caught the brilliance of the winter night, a faint flush warming her cold, clear skin, her eyes agleam under her dark hair.

"Can you get me a meal, Mrs. Marvin? I have had nothing since lunch in London."

"Yes, miss, of course."

"Has anyone called?"

"Miss Pinkney left a note, miss, that's all."

The housekeeper went her way, leaving Sybil and Tom Swaine together. Neither of them spoke for a moment. The mistress of the Red Ghyll was drawing off her gloves, her hands shining white against her sables.

"I hope they have looked after you properly?"

She looked at him over the red shade of the lamp.

"Almost too well, Miss Dathan."

"I am glad of that. I have been to see Mr. Cumberledge to-day."

Tom drew aside so that she might warm herself at the fire. He could almost guess what she was going to say to him, and his mouth tightened a little as he watched her cross the room.

"I told him everything about your accident. After all, his legal opinion need not concern us. It is really a question between ourselves."

She raised her eyes, and looked Tom straight in the face. He flushed slightly, as though such a look meant far more to him than it had meant two months ago.

"Mr. Cumberledge cannot consider that I have any claim if you told him the whole truth."

"Oh, he is not only a lawyer."

"I don't want you to offer me anything."

"Are you serious?"

There was no need for him to answer that question. She folded her gloves, and threw them on the table.

"Well, I think it utterly quixotic of you. It is not as though I grudged it—for one moment."

She glanced up sharply into his face, and its expression filled her with a spasm of deep and secret compassion.

"I suppose you are too proud?"

"Can you not let the matter rest, Miss Dathan?"

"No, because it does not seem fair to you."

He turned suddenly, and, moving to the window, looked out into the night. But even there he could not escape her nearness, for the dark casement-panes mirrored her to him as she stood before the fire.

"So my only conclusion is that you don't want to take my money?"

There was a short silence.

"No, Miss Dathan."

"Have you any plans?"

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"Things will shape themselves. I shall manage—somehow."

She watched him, her head thrown back a little, a compassionate smile hovering about her mouth.

"But do you realise——"

"I have thought of everything. One has to face the future."

"And what do you think of doing?"

"I hardly know yet."

"Shall you stay near here?"

"I shall go anywhere where there is a chance of earning a living."

"And with one arm!"

She saw him square his shoulders as though she had taunted him. Picking up one of the books from the table, she glanced perfunctorily from page to page.

"Will you answer a question?"

"Well, Miss Dathan."

"Why won't you take my money?"

He stared before him in silence for a moment.

"Don't ask me that."

"Why not?"

"It's because it's yours."

"Because it is mine?"

"Yes."

She put the book down again, an expression of subtle comprehension stealing across her face.

"Why should my money be hateful to you?"

She could see his left hand opening and closing.

"It isn't hateful."

"Why, then——"

He turned on her suddenly with a great spasm of suppressed feeling.

"It's because it's yours that I can't take it. Don't ask me why; I can't—I've no right to answer that. You've been too good to me as it is. It would hurt me to take the money from you."

He hung his head and did not look at her. The silence between them seemed tense and full of infinite



meaning. Sybil had picked up her gloves and was smoothing them almost fiercely between her hands.

"I am sorry," she said.

He stood as though humiliated.

"I shall not forget all that you have done for me. I can't say more; but it's the truth."

"Oh, don't thank me."

She heard him draw his breath.

"I shall be able to manage for myself in a day or two. The doctor says the wound is sound enough. If you can let me stay——"

"Of course."

"I shall wait on at the cottage."

"Till you can hear of something."

"Yes. My luck may change."

She moved slowly towards the door, opened it, and paused upon the threshold.

"I'm sorry you won't let me have my way," she said.

"Don't blame me, Miss Dathan; God knows—I have my réasons."

He stood staring at the closed door after she had left him, his eyes full of a yearning that he had hidden while she stood before him in the flesh. He heard her cross the landing to her room, and then the house became full of a great silence.

## CHAPTER XLII

THERE are some people in this world whom it is impossible to keep at a distance, and Mrs. Portia Hermon was such a person. She had invited the mistress of the Red Ghyll to lunch on New Year's Day, and proceeded to surround her with a cloud of officious curiosity, even as Napoleon's cuirassiers enveloped the British squares at Waterloo. Moreover, Mrs. Hermon had a habit of asking bald, blunt questions on subjects that the majority of people consider purely personal and private; and she suffered from the "lust to advise"—a lust that may be classed among the deadly sins.

With regard to her inquisitiveness on sentimental affairs, the lady was distinctly cheated. Sybil appeared to have nothing to confess. Balked of a Johnsonian decretal on matrimony, Mrs. Hermon diverged towards another topic that had exercised her sagacity for the last three weeks.

"Don't you think, my dear, that you are showing the man Swaine too much consideration?"

Beyond a slight flushing of the cheeks her guest appeared wholly unembarrassed.

"Indeed!"

"It is so easy to spoil these people; they are so ready to trade upon our generosity. And is it true, as Miss Pinkney informed me, that the man does not intend to demand compensation?"

"Quite true."

Mrs. Hermon looked exceedingly grave.

"I have often found that excessive honesty and candour are to be distrusted. They may be a species of affectation, assumed to cloak the real intentions."

"I am afraid you are too subtle for me."

"Of course, your solicitor is procuring something definite in writing from him?"

"Well—no."

"But this is unpardonable! It is possible that he may be posing to impress your generosity. I have experienced the very thing myself."

Deep down in Sybil Dathan's eyes there lurked a gleam of resentment and contempt. She kept a clear countenance, however, despite the lady's officious censorship of her affairs.

"I don't think you quite appreciate Tom Swaine's attitude."

"To me it appears highly suspicious."

"Really? You see, he is not an ordinary man. He is better educated and more refined than many people who might be tempted to look down on him."

Mrs. Hermon answered with a questioning stare, as though the girl's spirit of partisanship appeared to her somewhat singular.

"The man is a very decent fellow," she allowed—"perhaps inclined to be a little above himself. But what I desire to emphasise, my dear, is the way people are transformed where money is concerned. You may never discover a person's real character till some difference of opinion rises with regard to the eternal dollar."

Sybil suffered this piece of cynicism to pass unchallenged. She had begun to realise how little she had in common with Mrs. Hermon. She could imagine, too, how that lady's little pug of a nose would tilt its scorn at her if she were only wise as to what the future might hold in store.

"Let me advise you to be most circumspect, and to obtain something definite in writing."

Mrs. Hermon uttered these last words as Sybil rose to go.

"Thank you. I shall keep your advice in mind."

"And do not procrastinate, my dear, or let false sentiment complicate such a question. I have proved

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the fact from personal experience that a servant should be treated strictly as a servant. Otherwise he will presume. It may be different in the colonies. In England I may regard myself as something of an authority."

Sybil walked home to the Red Ghyll with the impatience of a woman whose heart is full of a richer lore than that of the schoolmistress or the genteel formalist. Her argument with Mrs. Hermon had enabled her to realise more vividly the nature of the sacrifice the future might compel. To many women the social niceties are as sacred as the clauses of a creed, and the exclusion from some select circle the most bitter doom that can fall from the decrees of fate. Yet what would such an ostracism mean in Ravenshoe? What would she lose thereby that could sap the warmth, the flavour, and the zest of life? A few rather dull people would regard her as "peculiar, undisciplined, and beyond the social pale." She would go to no garden-parties and receive no pieces of pasteboard from the card-cases of the elect. Nor was she bound to Ravenshoe by the chain of an inevitable destiny. She could find life elsewhere, fuller, richer, more satisfying in its human interests. Those who have the magic carpet that gold weaves need never to be pledged to one square mile of the earth's surface. Besides, she had that vital ambition in her—the ambition of a woman who believes in the future of the man she loves.

There was frost in the air, a crisp brilliance in the atmosphere, a sense of youth and keenness in the temper of the day. The polls of the Scots firs were very green against the blue. White clouds gleamed on the horizon. The sunlight glittered on the winter woods.

Sybil passed down under the shadows of the spruces to the garden where Tom would work no more. The place seemed to possess a new and deeper significance for her; it was as though it had served its purpose, and yet would be remembered ever as a

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green nook in the world's heart, where life had been reborn for her with all the colour and the tenderness of youth.

"Are you there, Mrs. Marvin?"

"Yes, miss."

"I shall be ready for tea in half an hour. Is Mr. Swaine in?"

"He's gone out, miss, down the fields."

"Thanks. I want to ask him whether he knows anything about that man who came up to ask for work this morning."

Tom, obstinate in his renunciation, was to leave on the morrow for his cottage on the hills above Ravenshoe. He had gone out that afternoon for a last walk through the Red Ghyll woods, sorrowful as a man who takes leave of things most dear. The future was to him as a mere shadowy horizon, his philosophy a species of mute fatalism that accepted the inevitable with stoical self-suppression.

Sybil met him coming up under the overhanging branches of the firs that lined the hedge of the last meadow. He was walking slowly, sadly, like a man whose heart is heavy. This blithe birth of the new year had no splendour for him, save in the melancholy beauty that it gave to the dark woods he loved.

"Mrs. Marvin told me you had gone down the fields."

He glanced at her with a kind of shyness.

"I have been down to the woods."

Sybil could fathom the impulse that had sent him thither.

"How grand they look with the streak of gold in the sky!"

He turned and stood gazing in silence at the purple spires under the gleaming west. When he turned to her again his face had a grey and empty look.

"Are you determined to go to-morrow?"

They were walking back together towards the orchard.

"Yes."

"But can you manage?"

"Oh, I am getting quite clever."

She glanced at the empty sleeve, and her heart smote her for his loneliness.

"Mrs. Marvin can come up and cook for you."

"I shall manage all right. It may not be for long."

Now a slip-gate led into the orchard—a hingeless gate whose rails fitted into sockets and notches in the posts. Sybil had climbed it on her way out. Tom, who was in front of her, lifted it with his left hand and swung it clear of the posts so that she might pass through.

"You need not have troubled."

She walked on a few paces and then turned to wait for him while he replaced the gate. Tom had lifted it again with his left arm, and while balancing it was trying to guide the rails into the sockets. But such a gate may puzzle a man with two hands to work his will, and the ends veered to and fro, as though mocking the man's one arm.

Sybil stood there watching him, held back for the moment by some strange feeling that she could not analyse. There was something pathetic in the way the slip-gate baffled him. It was as though it symbolised with grim simplicity the clumsy obtuseness of the blundering world that humiliates those who have lost some of the power to conquer its perversities.

Tom let the gate fall suddenly with the peevish impatience of a child.

"Let me help——"

She had started forward at last, only to pause with a deep intake of her breath. There were tears in Tom's eyes—the angry and bitter tears of a powerful man whose patience had broken down with a sense of his own helplessness.

The truth humbled her. She stood for a moment as though awed, or as though ashamed that she should have seen him in his humiliation.

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Tom had his hand again upon the gate. A sudden rush of pity swept all the lesser pride out of her heart. She started forward and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Tom——"

He did not look at her.

"I'm sorry. It was mean of me—I did not think."

Her voice failed her abruptly. There was a short silence. She still had her hand upon his shoulder.

"You don't know what this means to me."

He passed his hand across his eyes with a gesture of self-scorn.

"Miss Dathan, I'm a great fool, but——"

"No, no; I understand. I—well, I am just a woman."

It was as though some subtle transference of her self passed from her heart and through her arm into his body. Tom drew aside suddenly, so that her hand fell from his shoulder, and looked up incredulously into her eyes.

Her arm had fallen to her side. She stood there mute, with head bowed a little, her cheeks flushed, her eyes full of tremulous light. No true man could have looked at her and misunderstood all that her face revealed.

She remained motionless an instant, and then, lifting her head, she showed him the full depths of her eyes.

"I may help you, may I not? It means—something—to me."

Tom's face was the face of a man bewildered and half ashamed. He almost felt as though he had tricked her into a betrayal of her most sacred self.

## CHAPTER XLIII

HERE were two proud natures brought suddenly near to one another—the woman's poised between dignity and deep compassion, the man's in the momentary bewilderment of one shaken from his sleep. It was as though, for the first time, they looked into each other's hearts and saw all secrets magically revealed.

Tom turned again to the gate. Some prosaic trifle seemed needed to break the distraught silence that held them both.

"Let me help you."

She took one end of the rails and the gate was soon persuaded into place. Even this momentary excuse was lost to them for eluding the inevitable intimacy of their thoughts. They were alone together, and only too conscious of the predicament. Even where there are no social incongruities, love scenes are apt to be the most gauche and blundering of episodes; and here the complexities seemed woven into an intimate and tantalising tangle.

They turned, as by mutual consent, towards the orchard, walking a little apart, each trying to appear unembarrassed by the other's nearness. It seems more than probable that the incident might without either of them daring to challenge understanding.

The responsibility lay largely with the man, perhaps he realised it as he walked beside her in the orchard trees. He had one of those direct uncompromising natures that regard any shirk a situation as a symptom of moral cowardice. Over, his heart felt full of the deep things he wanted to utter and yet could not. Her silence sham



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He understood that her true womanliness could bend no farther towards him, and yet that he would humiliate her most ungenerously if he failed to play the man.

"Won't you forget this?"

He glanced at her half appealingly, as though not knowing how to make a beginning.

"What can one forget?"

"For the sake of my pride?"

"Your pride? Perhaps you don't realise all that it means to me."

They walked on in silence for a few paces, Tom with head bowed down as under the burden of his thoughts, Sybil pale, even to the pallor of an instinctive stateliness. The episode was robbing her of no dignity. Her inspiration was too true and deep for that.

"Why should we not be frank with one another? What have we to dread?"

He seemed to compel himself, a man driven to a confession against his pride.

"What right have I——"

"Well?"

"Even to say—to speak anything?"

She looked at him keenly.

"Are we so different?"

"Need you ask that? It is as plain as the sky—there. Yet—you don't know what the life here has been to me; I can't say—I have no right to say. But I shall remember everything to the day that die."

His meaning and the purpose thereof dawned on out of his inarticulate emotion. The attempt to juggle on with a few commonplace words carried even to the brink of that passionate and troubled world where man is swept towards the inevitable towards the eternal sea.

It has meant much to me also. Why should I have dared to confess it?"

He hung his head as though overburdened.

"It is just what life has given. You have your pride—I mine. What is there to be condemned?"

He opened his shoulders and lifted his face—the unconscious attitude of a man who is inspired to speak what his heart believes to be the truth.

"It is because I am not blind—that I see—that I have no right to think of you—save as what you have been to me—and what you are."

She held her breath, like a swimmer meeting a wave.

"Go on."

"It is because I am not blind that I hold to this poor pride of mine. Do you think I am—selfish enough—to let you sacrifice yourself? If I did not—not think of you as I do, it might be different."

They had crossed the orchard and were near the gate leading into the garden. It was a mutual impulse with both of them to pause, as though realising that they must play the last act in the little drama.

"Do you think I value the life among these people here?"

He looked at her under knitted brows.

"How can that change things? There is the same road for you—everywhere."

"What if I question it?"

"I have no right to question it for myself."

She spoke again after a moment's thought.

"I understand; and yet——"

"And yet——"

"It does not convince me, though I may honour you the more."

He looked about him almost fiercely, as though the impulse prompted him to surrender everything into her hands. Yet what was the use? The thing was impossible. It would be mere treachery to his own homage to her brother, who had been his friend. How could he take everything—he a man with scarcely a shilling, a maimed body, and no future? What would the folk of her own caste say of her? He could not make her suffer that,

"I don't know what to say to you. Only this——"

She waited, watching him, and he faltered, with a hot flushing of the face and a heaviness about the eyes.

"It has meant more to me——"

"Even that?"

"More to me—than a man can tell."

She held out her hand to him, and as by some chivalrous instinct that was almost boyish he bent and kissed it, and then turned, bareheaded, towards the gate. She watched him go, realising by what her own heart felt how much the ordeal meant to him, and how staunch and strong a thing his manhood was. For the moment she could not feel miserable or lonely. They had come so near to each other that winter day, and the poignant tenderness thereof was as some splendid stone that in the romance of old shed blood when worn by those who suffered.

Yet before an hour had passed Tom Swaine had left the Red Ghyll and gone in the dusk to his empty cottage on the hills. The chivalry of the deed touched her, though it made her realise the strength and honour of his will.

## CHAPTER XLIV

THERE are certain people in the world who seem suited to our various moods and phases—some who are ready to snarl with us over a grievance, others more fitted for the clapping of hands when there is a legacy to be enjoyed. Each man's individuality might stand for some particular vice or virtue. Each may have a *leit motif* for us, or a certain spiritual surface that reflects only certain thoughts. No girl in trouble would have gone to Mrs. Portia Hermon for sympathy, and no man who was convinced that he had a mission to fulfil would have called in John Pinkney to support him in the matter of ideals. Nor would a fanatic who was renouncing the opulence of life for the sake of an honourable whim have desired Mr. Anthony Jessel's opinion upon such an execrable method of bettering one's banking account.

The white mists were in the valley, and Tom was sorting a few of his papers at his desk by the light of a single candle, when he heard the click of the gate and the tramp of footsteps up the brick path. A fist rapped briskly at the door, the decisive rat-tat of a person who did not suffer from humility. Tom opened it, to find Anthony Jessel's sharp white beard barbing the darkness of the night.

"Well, I've been a long time coming to give you a visit. How goes it? I should have been up here before, but there's been a boom in repairs this leaky weather."

Tom had not seen the old man for a month or more.

"Come in."

Mr. Jessel had already removed his hat, as though

prepared for something more than a casual chat upon the doorstep. It struck Tom that he looked chubbier and more complacent about the face.

He led the way into the kitchen, where a wood fire blazed in the open grate. A rough oak settle stood before the hearth. Tom picked up a couple of fresh logs and tossed them on the fire, a crackle of sparks streaming into the blackness of the great chimney.

Anthony Jessel pulled a chair forward and felt for his pipe.

"Well, I've heard from the girl," he said, with the brisk air of a man who has good news to tell.

"Oh!"

Tom looked at Nat Jessel vacantly for the moment, as though the vivid present had wiped away the vaguer past.

"I always said the little Tartar 'd come to no harm."

Tom sat down on the settle.

"She's married him," continued the man of foot-gear laconically, with a slight smirk of pride—"that footballing fellow Ramsden. Made him knuckle to it somehow. The chap's had a little money left him, and they're taking a smart little pub. I always said the girl was born to drive in a red-wheeled gig."

Tom's eyes were fixed upon the fire. A gleam of cynicism had passed across his face. He was wondering how it was that he had ever wished to marry Rose.

"She's sent back some of that money."

"Oh!"

"As sure as I'm alive"—and he looked cheerfully smug and sly—"I reckon I shall have to give 'em a pram or a bassinet for the youngster when it comes."

Tom's mood did not expand towards Mr. Jessel's rather vulgar cheerfulness, for when a man is in love he revolts more fiercely from the coarser habits of the crowd. Moreover, Anthony Jessel seemed to personify a past to him that was not wholly pleasing to his pride. Nor is the comic side of life full of mean-

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ing to a man who realises that the near future may threaten him with starvation.

The repairer of boots eyed Tom critically over the bowl of his pipe. He had come to gather information as well as to dispense it.

"Bit lonesome here, isn't it?"

Tom pushed the settle back into the deeper shadows.

"It won't be for long."

"What—giving the place up?"

"Yes."

"Not the job too?"

"I'm not much use there; that's pretty obvious, I should think."

Mr. Jessel nodded gravely, his sharp eyes fixed on Tom's face.

"I heard some sort of gossip down the town," he confessed, "but I did not give much heed to it. Old John Merver as much as told me that you were going to sell everything up."

"Next week."

"Furniture and all?"

"Everything."

"And what the deuce——"

"I want the money; that's fairly simple."

"But, damn it, you're going to get compensation, surely?"

"That is my affair."

"What's she going to give you, eh?"

Tom's eyes gave a significant gleam. Anthony Jessel was thrusting his officious friendliness into sacred precincts, and treading where a lover suffered no one but himself to tread.

"You want to know a great deal," he said quietly.

Anthony Jessel pouted his lips forward about the stem of his pipe. He appeared to be puzzled by the situation, and he glanced thoughtfully at Tom's empty sleeve.

"Well, I don't know about that," he retorted "they were only saying down in Ravenshoe how i

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ought to be a comfortable sort of thing for you. The lady doesn't seem one of those close-fisted females. What's more——"

The muscles about the angles of Tom's jaw were tightening.

"It would be a good thing if people minded their own affairs."

"It ain't human nature, sir; life's a sort of open show, you know. And you're not like one of us, Mr. Tom Swaine. You've got the gentlemanly breed about you, and a precious lot of information in your head. I've heard it said that this Miss Dathan couldn't have treated you better if you'd been her brother."

There was a twinkle of insinuating slyness in Anthony Jessel's eyes. Tom sat staring grimly at the fire.

"Miss Dathan is a lady," was all he said. "She's generous, and she's done more for me than I should have asked."

Nat Jessel hitched himself up in his chair.

"What d'you reckon the stuff will fetch?" he asked, glancing round the kitchen.

"I haven't worked it out."

"Who's doing the job?"

"Gregon."

Mr. Jessel nodded.

"He won't let a thing go for twopence if he can get a shilling. It seems a bit rough, though, doesn't it?"

Tom stared at the fire.

"There's nothing to leave," he said quietly; "you see, they are all dead."

"Then you're going to leave us?"

"A man does better sometimes by turning up fresh ground."

Tom's grim melancholy had a blighting effect upon the repairer of boots, and Mr. Anthony Jessel's curiosity was distinctly piqued. There was some mystery here that he was not meant to fathom, and

Nat Jessel had as keen a scent for a mystery as a terrier for a rat. To be convinced in his suspicions he had only to study Tom Swaine's face, thrown into high relief by the firelight and the shadows of the room. It was the determined yet miserable face of one going alone into the dark he knew not whither.

Anthony Jessel relit his pipe, gave Tom a grip of the hand, and trudged off homewards towards Ravenshoe.

"She must have given him something down and told him to clear out," he reflected as he went slowly up the hill. "Maybe Tom's one of those soft things that can't drive a bargain with a woman. She can't have given him much, or he wouldn't be selling his sticks. That's a nice bit of old oak he's got in the parlour. I'll turn up and have a shout for it. It may go cheap."

Tom had followed Anthony Jessel into the raw dusk of a January night. He was leaning against the gate and looking out over the valley, out towards where a glimmer of light showed him where the old house lay. Below, in the deeps of the valley, the white mist stood like a great white pool. The woods rose from it, black and grim, as rocks rise above the surface of the sea.

Tom stood there in the darkness, feeling the night near to him and the raw silence thereof heavy about his heart.

"It's good-bye to the old place," he thought. "I wonder what I shall be doing this time next year? Perhaps she will stay on here, and forget—all about—the rest."



## CHAPTER XLV

"SEVEN shillings I am bid. Eight shillings may I say? Eight shillings, gentlemen. A good oak settle; eight shillings; worth sixteen; going—going—for the last time. Yours—Mr. Bottomley."

Half a dozen country carts were ranged along the roadside, with two or three loafers lounging and smoking outside the garden gate. Odd bits of furniture, tools, chicken-coops, old timber, lined the brick path and the weedy beds. From the cottage itself came the voice of the auctioneer, strident, persistent, and persuasive, as he knocked down lot after lot to those in quest of bargains.

The cottage seemed full of inquisitive, prying people, who poked about everywhere with an air of morose caution. There was quite a small crowd in the parlour, a crowd that oozed out through the doors and insinuated itself into the gaps between various articles of furniture. The auctioneer, a young man with a very black, clean-shaven chin, and a pair of hard blue eyes in a colourless face, stood with his back to the window, a notebook in one hand, a big pencil in the other—a pencil big enough for rapping the little table that served him as a desk.

"Now, then, gentlemen, an old oak escritoire, or desk, Lot 35, excellent condition, genuine antique, solid throughout, drawers, pigeon-holes, lock in proper order. What shall we say now, gentlemen—two pounds ten? Two pounds ten, and cheap at that."

The half-circle of stolid faces stared at him in cautious silence. It was as though each man mis-

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trusted his neighbour and was shy of hearing his own voice.

"Anyone name a price for me, then? An article well worth snapping up, gentlemen."

A sharp white beard wagged laconically.

"Fifteen shillings."

"Come, come now, that's a poor start. Fifteen shillings I am bid. Sixteen shillings may I say? Sixteen? Thank you, sir. Sixteen shillings I am bid. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty. You make it twenty, Mr. Jessel. Twenty shillings I am bid, gentlemen. Solid oak desk, quite a curio, old English pattern. Twenty-one shillings may I say? For the last time, gentlemen. Going at twenty. Yours—Mr. Jessel."

The stolid half-circle stirred slightly, like an audience at the end of a turn on a music-hall stage. Solemn countrymen looked coyly at each other. Someone ventured on a joke. The auctioneer jotted down a note in his book. Then the entertainment went on as before.

A commonplace scene enough, and yet one that may suggest something of tragedy, something of pathos: the eternal bargain at the breaking up of a home; the lust to gain cheaply what another may be sacrificing with bitterness and a heavy heart; the crowding of strangers into the familiar places that are no longer sacred, each bartered trifle taking with it perhaps a memory and a sigh.

It is easy to sentimentalise over such a scene, and yet it is to and fro amid the simpler things of life that a man's sentiments are most closely woven. Tom Swaine, loitering in the garden, stooping to pull up an odd weed here and there, and trying to forget the presence of the idlers at the gate, felt to the quick the bitterness of it all. He had begun by attempting to watch the sale with the imperturbable air of a man mainly interested in the matter of his pocket. Yet the dull, cautious faces, the morose reticence, the meanness, the sordid matter-of-factness

of it all, had made him wince and suffer behind his stoical reserve. He had seen things he had remembered from boyhood knocked down to strangers, or to people who had been familiar with his prouder days. The cold, strident voice of the seller had irritated him. It was as though each grudging bid were an insult flung at the memory that remained with him as "home." What did these people care? Yet it was ridiculous to blame them for being loyal to their own pockets. He had slipped out at last into the garden, feeling like a man of no account among his fellows.

"Woa there, Jolly! Tip ut up over th' tail-board, Jim."

Above the thorn hedge Tom had a glimpse of his oak desk being lifted laboriously into a cart by two men. It was the old desk that had belonged to Magnus Swaine, and in which Tom had stored many memories, and much of his deeper self. He had meant to bid for it himself, and now the loss of the thing gave him a sudden sense of emptiness at the heart. He wondered vaguely who had bought the thing, and whether it had gone for an old song.

"Now, gentlemen, old family Bible, two hundred years old. What shall we say, gentlemen? Two pounds? Two pounds, then."

The words reached Tom, and he stood irresolute a moment, his left hand groping in his pocket. The bidding for this relic of a family's past seemed by no means brisk. Someone offered three shillings. A woman's voice capped the bid. Tom thought he recognised it as he listened.

"I can't let that go."

He turned towards the cottage, only to be driven back from the door by a man carrying a pile of bedding. A dull hum of voices came from within. Tom, edging his way forward, tried to catch what was passing.

"I should like to bid for that, Mr. Gregson."

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The auctioneer was scribbling in his notebook. He glanced up towards the door.

"Did you speak, Mr. Swaine?"

"Yes; I want to bid for—that—book."

"Sorry, sir; it's just gone."

"Oh."

"To a lady here. Perhaps you can come to some agreement among yourselves."

A few dull, expressionless faces were turned towards Tom. He faltered a moment and then turned away.

"Thanks; it doesn't matter."

He went out into the garden without so much as discovering who had bought the book. He was too hurt, too sore, too humiliated to chaffer for the thing. His one desire for the moment was to be alone, and to be rid of all these pushing, bargaining, staring people.

"Thank God she did not live to see it."

He was thinking of his mother.

"Perhaps it's better that she's dead."

Now, at the Red Ghyll Sybil sat in the long room before the fire, a book in her lap and a far-away sadness in her eyes. She knew what was passing at the cottage on the hills, and with the sympathy of one who loves she knew what the ordeal must mean to Tom.

Neither of them had seen each other since the day of his leaving the Red Ghyll; neither of them knew what change might be working in the heart of the other. Both of them were proud, and both had a sensitive respect for the other's pride.

But for Sybil the man's obstinate reticence and the self-banishment that he purposed had a significance that she could not shirk. It was the woman in the drama who, by the force of an inevitable instinct, was driving the man from the fair land that he loved. Had the owner of the Red Ghyll been a man and not a woman, the whole setting would have been different,

the psychology less subtle, and the finale less bitter to them both. Her womanhood had armed Tom's pride against himself, whereas he might have taken a boon from the hands of a man.

Sybil's heart was sad in her over the pathetic complexity of it all, when Mrs. Marvin, in black bonnet and cloak, returned with a ponderous parcel under her arm. The housekeeper had been to the sale at Tom's cottage. It was she who had bought the Swaine Bible, with the quaint records of a family's past.

Mrs. Marvin found her mistress half lying in her favourite chair before the fire. The dusk was deepening, and her face was in the shadow.

"Is that you, Mrs. Marvin?"

"Yes, miss."

Sybil did not move. Anyone might have thought that she had been asleep.

"Have you been up to the sale?"

"Yes, miss."

"How is it going?"

"Oh, they've just been selling the poor fellow's home, and crowding and pushing like a lot of pigs. It struck me as pitiful, miss; it made me feel quite bad."

There was a short silence. Sybil's voice, when she spoke, betrayed nothing to Mrs. Marvin.

"I suppose it is nearly over?"

"They were just finishing when I left, miss. I saw Mr. Tom only just once."

"Oh!"

"And I shan't forget his face—to the day that I die. It was just as though he hadn't anything left to live for. And all those fellows crowding and pushing among his things."

Mrs. Marvin's voice began to grow querulous and inarticulate. She groped for a handkerchief, while her mistress lay staring at the fire.

"Couldn't you help him—just a little, miss?"

"I tried, Mrs. Marvin. He wouldn't listen to me."

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"Dear, dear! just his contrary pride! I bought the Bible."

"Oh!"

"I'm not going to keep it, you understand. I felt, somehow, that I must have something. And I know that he wants it, for he came in after it was sold and asked for to buy. But when the auctioneer man said how it was gone, he just went out into the garden as though he hadn't the heart in him to say another word."

"That was good of you, Mrs. Marvin."

"I couldn't help it, miss. But it just made me want to cry."

The housekeeper was preparing for the sorrowful delight of tears, when Sybil sat up sharply in her chair as though she had heard footsteps outside the house.

"There's someone coming down the path, Mrs. Marvin."

"I'll call Nellie, miss——"

"If it should be Mr. Pinkney or his sister, or anyone like that, I can't see them."

Mrs. Marvin paused with her handkerchief half-way between her pocket and her face.

"You won't see them, miss?"

"No—I can't."

They heard the creaking of the bell-pull and then the clangour of the bell. Mrs. Marvin blundered off towards the kitchen. The girl Nellie was dispatched to the porch.

"Miss Dathan is in? Thanks. I'll not keep her a minute."

John Pinkney had walked past the girl with the easy assurance of a man who considered himself a privileged and familiar friend. The curtain alone divided the porch from the passage. He drew it aside, and saw Sybil's figure outlined by the firelight as she stood beside the chair.

"Rude of me—pushing in like this. You'll excuse it, won't you?"

She did not move, and her voice had a hardness when she answered him.

"Oh—come in, please. Nellie, light the lamp."

The visitor pulled a chair forward so that he faced the fire. His self-assured manner betrayed, despite its ease, a certain constrained nervousness, as though John Pinkney had something upon his mind. Sybil had long since discovered whither the little man's inclinations were tending. Intuition put her upon her guard.

"I just dropped in at the sale up there at Swaine's cottage. He had one or two old bits of furniture that I fancied, quite genuine stuff. I had given a man from Ravenshoe an order to buy."

"Oh!"

She spoke as though tired or sleepy. There was the sharp scratching of a match, a faint glow, the gradual rising of the room from dusk into light as the servant lit the lamp.

"The things went confoundedly cheap."

She turned and leant against the mantelshelf, one hand holding her skirt.

"Did you succeed?"

"Yes. I wanted to buy the things from old Swaine three years ago when he broke up. I offered him a very decent price, but the old man was so confoundedly independent. He had a sort of pride in the stuff, I suppose. They went cheap enough to-day."

Nellie had disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. Sybil waited, as though listening for the closing of the kitchen door.

"I suppose we all take advantage of other people's misfortune."

John Pinkney pricked up his ears. There was something like an aggressive challenge in her voice.

"I beg your pardon, Sybil—but——"

"Do you want to sell again? I mean that I am willing to purchase at a fair profit."

The little man looked not only embarrassed, but a little hurt.

"As a matter of fact, Nan——"

"Oh, your sister?"

"Wants the things more than I do. She has the curio mania. But, of course——"

She snatched the opportunity from him of appearing gallant.

"I would not for one moment deprive her of a bargain."

"Oh, but I assure you, if you are really keen. You see, you have got the old people's house, and some of their furniture would add to the interest, the *tout ensemble*—that's it, isn't it?"

Sybil leant her chin upon her hand. Her face would have surprised John Pinkney had he had a fair and open view thereof. Those last words of his had hurt her deep down in the core of her pride and pity.

"Thanks. Let us say no more. As a matter of fact, I am thinking of selling the Red Ghyll."

John Pinkney sat up on his haunches with a quaint expression of surprise.

"Selling the place!"

"Yes."

"You don't mean to say that you are serious?"

"Quite serious."

"Why, I thought you——"

He hesitated, with a sudden glimpse of a clear, hard profile and the slight lifting of the angle of a contemptuous mouth. She did not give him the liberty of elaborating a confession.

"The fact is that I find Ravenshoe and the neighbourhood somewhat dull. There is not a great deal to do here. I miss the vitality of larger interests. It is more than likely that I shall travel."

For some reason, purely personal, John Pinkney took the condemnation to himself.

"I must say I'm sorry. I thought—— Well—— It never occurred to me that we were so jolly dead alive."

He paused, but she did not seem moved courteously to deny the insinuation.



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"You see, we colonials have a kind of briskness in the blood."

"The old country strikes you as moribund?" And he gulped out a self-conscious and pompous little laugh.

"No, not that altogether. But there are things one misses. Well, really—you might consider me rude."

John Pinkney discovered himself suddenly upon his feet. Something in her manner suggested that she intended to snub him, though he was unable to register anything more than a keen impression. Clever women have a genius for embarrassing dull people—when they wish it. To criticise a select community is to challenge the individual. And John Pinkney was a very complacent and self-satisfied little person.

"I thought we were all shaking down very well together," he confessed with a piqued throatiness.

"I'm sorry if I have offended against your prejudices."

Her visitor had sufficient intelligence to detect an ironical meaning in her manner. She did not pretend to be contrite or conciliatory.

"Of course, we shall regret—your determination."

He pulled out his watch.

"If you are particularly keen about the furniture—of course——"

"Oh, not in the least. I know the fascinations of a bargain. Please remember me to your sister."

And John Pinkney beat a retreat.

"What the devil's come to the woman?" he reflected. "She seemed upset the moment I spoke about that furniture. A bit of temper, perhaps. Most likely it's only some confounded whim."

Sybil was staring at the fire with a curious light in her eyes and a smile playing about her mouth. If John Pinkney misunderstood her, she at least did not misunderstand him.

## CHAPTER XLVI

BEFORE the wood fire burning in the open hearth of the cottage kitchen Tom Swaine sat on the end of an upturned box, with a second box beside him to serve as a table.

It was his last night in the cottage, and he was spending it alone, with the rubbish from his woodshed for fuel and the floor to serve him for a bed if he cared for such a thing as sleep.

Beyond a litter of straw and paper, odds and ends of string and rope, a few old boxes and some cracked china, the cottage had been stripped from the parlour to the attics. Tom had sold everything, and there was nothing left save the two trunks that held his clothes and a few books and trifles. Even his tools had gone from the shed, for he would use them no more. Tom carried the money that the sale had made for him in a purse sewn to the leather belt that he wore.

There had been proffers of hospitality. Anthony Jessel had sent a message from Ravenshoe—Anthony Jessel, who had bought Tom's oak desk for twenty shillings, and resold it to John Pinkney, Esq., for three pounds.

"There's a bed and some food down our way, if Mr. Swaine is agreeable."

But Tom had a prejudice in favour of spending that last night alone in the empty cottage. He had a fire to warm him, some food, a pouch of tobacco, no one to ask questions or to weary him with advice. The carrier was to call for his boxes at eight. His debts were paid. He owed no man anything in Ravenshoe.

It was as though January had summoned his trumpeters to blow Tom Swaine out of Ravenshoe, and with a rattle of rain upon the muffled drums of the night. The empty cottage seemed full of weird sounds in its bare rooms and cupboards. The wind swished briskly through the great yew tree in the garden, roared in the chimney and chattered at the casements. The rain came like a scud blown from the sea, with the night full of turbulence and unrest.

Yet to Tom there was a fierce zest in the sonorous sound and in the sense of passionate movement that possessed the darkness. The surging gallop of the wind had a fine abandonment. He could even hear the distant woods roaring like a dark host that shakes its spears and gathers for the charge. The stormy temper of the night was better than stagnant mist or banal moonlight, or the smoothly spoken epilogue of a summer day.

How the great beech trees would be battling and moaning about the towers of Ravenshoe! And, more eloquent still—those soaring, sailing pines above the red roof beneath which she slept! How they would be striding with the storm, the foam of the wind breaking on their bluff foreheads! It was difficult for him to realise that he might never see her again. And yet it would be better, infinitely better for them both. How could he offer her anything but a memory? Yet it was but natural that the heart in him should yearn for the things that might have been.

A sugar-box with a cracked cup on it, an old plate and an empty pipe; a few bank-notes and sovereigns in his pocket; a dusty, rubbish-littered cottage. There was not much romance about these details.

Tom broke into a short, sharp laugh, as though there were a cynical drollery in the contrast between fact and desire. His mood took a darker tint, as though overshadowed by the inevitable. The last armful of rotten wood crackled on the hearth; the solitary candle boasted three inches of wax. When

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these failed him he could kick some of the loose straw together and try to sleep.

The wind still rushed over the hills and through the woods, but its sound was as the sound of wailing in lieu of the call of battle. The imagery that gives a human significance to Nature is a mere trick of the mind of man. The trees moan when he so wills it, or shout and clamour when his child's heart beats to a happier measure. The dullest of skies may never be so dismal as the blue glare of summer when hope is in the dust.

Tom's mood had darkened. It was as though the wind now prophesied to him of all the evils that the future held. Rough, strenuous facts crowded in upon his brain as though challenging him to answer their demands. The draught blew wisps of straw across the floor. The fire was sinking into a pile of embers. The cold breath of the winter night began to creep into every corner.

To-morrow! The beginning of a new life for him—a life that would stretch into the unknowable and the unknown. Early, just when the grey dawn was coming, the carrier would call for those two corded trunks. He would lock up the cottage, glance round a moment at the landscape and the little garden, and walk down into Ravenshoe to leave the key at the agent's office. Perhaps he would turn in amid the yews of the churchyard on his way. For the last time he might see the beech boughs glistening in the sunlight about Ravenshoe's towers. Then in a few hours would come the smoke and swirl of a great city. The quest of the improbable would begin. The trend of it all seemed towards bitterness and defeat.

Yet there would always be that last resort to the taunts of Fate—the refusal to live and to be made the sport of circumstance. Tom found himself facing the grim vision with the prejudice of a man whose life's instinct had been against surrender—the rush of black water under a bridge at night; the empty pistol in the stiff, cold hand; or the dusky pallor

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of poison about the mouth! Sentimental impulses or the pique of an ill-poised vanity may lend a morbid fascination to some such vision when the character is none too vigorous. Or the end may come with a stupor of apathy following upon despair. Yet to the strong man such an end is never easy; his finer pride revolts from it as from a confession of defeat.

Tom shook himself and thrust a foot into the embers of the dying fire. They blazed up transiently, symbolising the brightening of his courage against morbid and unnerving thoughts. It would be better for him to sleep than to debauch himself with such reflections.

He picked up his empty pipe, and felt in his pocket for his tobacco-pouch. He was in the act of opening it upon his knee, when something appeared to startle him—a sound that had more meaning than the clamour of the wind.

He sat motionless a moment, listening, his eyes fixed upon the fire. The hands of his watch were moving towards midnight. And yet he was possessed by that mysterious feeling that there was someone near him, that he was not alone.

The sound came to him more loudly than before. Tom rose, and taking the candle in his hand, he went into the parlour. The bare window showed the blackness of the outer night. Setting the candle upon the sill, he turned the key, and swung the door open. Against the opaque darkness of the night he saw the figure of a woman.

An instant of doubt and of swift surmisings, and he knew that it was Sybil.

They stared at each other for a moment in silence. The cry of the wind seemed to voice some problem for them. Then she stepped over the threshold into the room. .

“So—you are still here,”

## CHAPTER XLVII

SHE turned back the hood of her cloak, and Tom could see the glister of rain upon her face and upon her hair. There was nothing of the suppliant about her, but rather a suggestion of haughtiness in the pallor of her face and the steadiness of her eyes.

"You had better shut the door, or the wind will blow the candle out."

He obeyed her, wondering what was to come.

"You have sold everything?"

"Yes."

"I should be able to see that for myself."

She looked round her at the dim walls, the curtainless window, and the bare floor. The place seemed empty and cheerless enough, lit by the flame of the solitary candle.

"When are you leaving?"

"Early to-morrow."

"I have something to say to you before you go."

She seemed to have swept aside all the little discretions and barriers of life by this strange act of hers. Tom looked at her, baffled by her calmness, and none too sure of his own strength. This coming of hers seemed no whim born of a woman's impulse. There was something more purposeful, more perilous, behind that face that had dared the wind and the rain at midnight.

He took the candle.

"There is a fire in the kitchen."

She crossed the room, Tom following at a little distance like a gentleman usher conducting some great madame to her chamber. The two wooden boxes before the fire were not in sympathy with the illusion.

"I am sorry the place is so bare."

She drew one of the boxes slightly to one side, and sat down. Tom remained standing.

"So you are still—obstinate."

She looked up at him, her lips trembling a very little, as though quivering under the importunity of the words she would not suffer them to utter.

"Yes."

The steadiness of her glance troubled him.

"Where are you going?"

"To London."

"Oh! And you hope to get work?"

"Well—I must live."

She gave a compassionate shrug of the shoulders.

"I know. But do you realise what it all means? I lived for a while once in London; it used to have a fascination for me—the study of the streets, and of the street corners, and the places we call 'slums.'"

The confession surprised him, for surely she had led him to believe that she had never been in England since she was a child. And yet he stood staring silently at the fire, as though foreseeing the attack that was developing behind the screen of words.

"Do you know anything of London?"

"Practically nothing."

"And yet you are ready to stake your future there—just as many a man has done before. I tell you it is often a great web for the entangling of souls, a place where men may sink, and starve, and die. We are all human; none of us have superhuman strength. The best of us can only struggle; we cannot always win. As for the weak and the unfortunate—well, you may find them by hundreds in such a city. They fail; they were doomed to fail. They degenerate; they are submerged; they disappear."

She spoke without flattering, as a woman speaks when she tells the truth. She might even have had no intimate feeling in the matter, save the calm desire

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to paint life as it is. Once or twice her eyes had glanced towards the man's empty sleeve.

Tom stood with his left hand gripping the collar of his coat. She was only repeating to him his own prophetic thoughts, foreshadowing a future that he had compelled himself to face.

"I am not blind," he said quietly.

"Then you realise——"

"Everything."

"Yet why sink yourself in such a place? In the country—here—you have your knowledge. In London—it would be wasted."

"What prospects should I have here?"

"A man's head may be of more value than his hands."

"If I had any influence—or——"

"Money?"

"Yes."

She unfastened her cloak, and let it slip from her shoulders to the floor. It was as though they had come to life's cross-ways together, each knowing that these words might be the last.

"And yet you persist in making me bear—everything!"

Tom glanced down at her, with a spasm of feeling sweeping across his face.

"You——"

"Can you not see what it all means? You are making an idol of your pride. If it had been otherwise—even if I had been a man—you would not have sacrificed—us—yourself—for a shadow of honour."

"But it is because——"

"I am a woman."

"Because—your life is not my life."

"Rather—because I have a certain thing called money. Supposing my brother were still alive, that he were in my place. Would you have refused him the right of acting even as a friend?"

He remained silent a moment.



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"Circumstances——"

"Alter cases?"

"Perhaps. But then——"

"Your pride is unutterable."

"What can I say, Miss Dathan?"

"I, too, have pride. Let us see whether it can suffer!"

She rose suddenly, her right hand busy with something that she wore upon her left wrist. It was a leather wristlet made to carry a watch. She unbuckled it and laid it upon the mantelshelf.

"Now I will let you judge me."

He looked at her questioningly, with the air of a man made miserable by his own self-will.

"Take the light."

He obeyed her. She turned to the fire, and stretched out her left arm behind her.

"Do you see anything on that wrist?"

He stood motionless, staring at her hand as though utterly at a loss to gauge her meaning.

"Look."

He lowered the candle, and bent his head, his face innocent of all suspicion.

"Well?"

There was a short pause.

"Do you see anything?"

He noticed that her hand was trembling.

"There is a faint—white line."

"A faint white line. The mark of an old wound."

He glanced up at her sharply, but saw only the white curve of her neck and her dusky hair.

"Do you remember one rainy day in June?"

She waited for him to speak.

"It was your brother——"

"Think, and you may understand."

She stood with her eyes fixed on the embers of the fire, the wind ringing in her ears through the man's silence, a slight flush creeping over her face and neck.

Tom was still gazing at her wrist, lines of deep,

incredulous thought running across his forehead. He drew back suddenly with a great intake of breath.

"You—you were——"

Her hand was shaking.

"It was my wrist that bled!"

"Yours!"

"Don't ask me anything. You have made me tell you that—which—I would never have had you know."

## CHAPTER XLVIII

SHE was standing gazing at the dying fire, a glow as of mysterious light beating upon her face, her eyes full of many memories. She had told the man everything in short, sharp sentences, confessions threaded together like the beads on the thread of a rosary.

Tom stood behind her, in the shadow, with the air of one who has come suddenly into the sacred secrets of another's life. He was realising what this confession meant to her, and wondering what he should say to her in return.

There had been a short silence, with the wind thundering in the chimney, and the whole cottage shaking with the storm.

"Perhaps, now that I have disillusioned you, it will be easier for us to talk as friends."

He glanced at her figure, the curve of her neck, the soft lustre of her hair. She seemed so womanly to him that he wondered why she spoke of disillusionment.

"I have made up my mind to sell the Red Ghyll."

"To sell it?"

"Yes; its memories might not be wholly happy ones for me. And these people—these British neighbours of mine—they make me impatient. What have we in common? There is not one among them whom I desire as a friend."

Tom glanced at the candle that was burning steadily towards its socket. These last words of hers had a new meaning for him; yet he was thinking for her, not for himself.

"You need not have told me—this."

She still stood with her face turned towards the

fire, wondering the while whether all the charm of her womanliness had fled.

"It was inevitable." You know how strong and obstinate a thing is pride. Your pride hurt me, because it was driving you to sacrifice yourself."

She paused a moment, and they heard the rushing of the wind over the roof and through the trees.

"Perhaps you can understand what all this means to me. There was no sin in it, only the rebellious impulse of a disillusioned and unhappy girl. And then, despite my cynicism, I found my woman's pride again. To regain it I had to scheme—to act a part. All that is past and done with. What I was yesterday to you I cannot be to-day."

Tom was watching her as though each word she spoke sank down into his heart.

"And yet I had no right——"

"How could I let you go out into the world maimed, and without a friend? The thought hurt me. Your pride stood in the way. There was only one thing that might make you—relent, and that was to sacrifice the glamour, and break the spell that made you refuse to be helped by a mere woman."

Tom stood as though irresolute, the impulse of the heart struggling to break from the shackles that his pride had forged. It was the crisis of a life with him, that one passionate moment of doubt and of desire when a man's finer nature strives to struggle above all the inconsistencies of self.

He spoke at last, slowly, and with deep meaning.

"To me—you have sacrificed nothing."

"You say that—because—I am a woman."

"No; before God, it is because you are humbling my own pride, and because I know how greatly you have trusted me."

She turned from the fire, and they stood facing one another—Sybil with her eyes shadowy as with unshed tears; Tom with his head bowed down in thought, his left arm hanging at his side.

"I wonder why it should be so difficult?"

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There was a thrilling softness in her voice that brought a gleam of light into Tom's eyes.

"It is as though we each were trying to act as scapegoat for the other. And yet——"

She paused and faltered, her eyes downcast, a smile hovering about her mouth. Tom stared at the floor; then he lifted his face suddenly to hers.

"I was obstinate—well—for your sake—not—for my own."

"Yes, I know that. Why should we think of these small things? Do they, then, mean so much?"

He answered her after a moment's thought.

"No, perhaps not—when one has trampled down one's pride."

The candle gave a prophetic flicker. Tom saw it, as did Sybil.

"My cloak—Tom."

He picked it up, and she turned so that he could lay it upon her shoulders. Their hands touched. A thrill passed up either arm.

"I must go home—now."

"Can I come as far as the farm?"

She looked at him steadily over her shoulder.

"Yes."

They left the candle glimmering in the socket, and passed out together into the wind and rain. A chaos of clouds huddled across the dusky sky. The hedgerows shivered. The wind roared through the trees.

Tom opened the gate. In the dark his hand touched Sybil's. The impulse seemed mutual with them. They went on hand in hand.

For a while neither of them spoke. Their nearness seemed to cast a spell, to solemnise, to fill them with a sense of mystery and of awe.

Sybil was the first to break the silence. "Do you forgive me?"

"Forgive!"

"For that double life, and this—this victory?"

His hand contracted upon hers, and though his

face was as a shadow to her, she could guess—and imagine.

"I have no right to ask anything."

"No, do not say that."

"What is there to forgive?"

"That—that depends on how much I seem to you—a woman."

They were quite near to the spruce-trees and the firs, dark and sonorous under the hurrying sky. Not a light glimmered from the windows of the house.

"Yes, we must renounce this. Can you suffer me to sell it?"

"I can bear anything for you," he answered.

"There is the wide world open to us. We can go quietly away—from all these people."

They paused at the gate, with the boughs swaying above their heads.

"It is not good night for us," she said, "but good morrow."

He opened the gate for her, and over the bars he bent his head and kissed her hand.

"God bless you!" he said.

And he watched her pass into the darkness under the trees.

## AN AFTERGLOW

It was a very ordinary December evening, with nothing suggestively romantic in the temper of the weather, when Mrs. Portia Hermon's monthly box of books arrived from her London circulating library. Mrs. Hermon, whose bored pomposity had thought to exercise itself, for lack of other labours, by reprimanding all the servants, hailed the coming of these books with satisfaction. She descended upon that casket of literature with some of the avidity of a girl of seventeen. Mrs. Hermon was a gross gourmand in the matter of biographies and books of travel. Yet she warmed her sentiments periodically with the adjectival fulminations of God's Good Genius of the Midlands.

Mrs. Hermon sampled the collection. The first volume to appear clowned it gaudily in red and yellow. At the sight of the title and the authoress's name Mrs. Hermon's face assumed an extreme hauteur, as though she had received an invitation to the local Member of Parliament's "second garden-party," an after-crush sacred to shopkeepers and the like.

"An insult—putting one of this woman's books into my box! There ought to be a rigorous censorship when such abomination is published. I shall have to write to Stukeley's and complain."

Mrs. Hermon dropped the red and yellow book back into its place. What desire had she to read a novel with such a title as "How a Man Sins"? And it had been banned at the bookstalls. Well, it was possible that she might glance through it before writing to complain.

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The second venture fished up something in the way of romance.

"'The Pool of Purple'! How excessively absurd! I wish these people would use a little discrimination. The title might be a poetical way of describing a plum-tart."

She dived again, and this time brought up something more solid and more stately—a book bound in turquoise blue, and scrolled with gold, a heavy and a sumptuous book such as might repose with dignity in the august lap of a dean.

Mrs. Hermon glanced at the title.

"A Pilgrimage in Syria."

That seemed eminently satisfactory. Moreover, the publisher's name was one of solid repute.

Mrs. Hermon edged her chair a little nearer to the fire, adjusted her glasses, and prepared to be instructed, which is some people's idea of being amused.

There were a good many photographs of picturesque Arabs, bleak desert landscapes, ruins, palm-trees, glimpses of the mysterious East. Mrs. Hermon dipped through the pictures, and then began solidly at the preface. She had read and turned over some fifty pages before she came upon a certain photograph that made her eyes take a startled stare behind her glasses.

"A Cosmopolitan Group."

Mrs. Hermon held the book up to the light, with the eagerness of one on the brink of a discovery. The photograph had been taken with the wall of an old temple as a background. The group consisted of the collaborating authors and their retinue, but it was upon the two central figures that Mrs. Hermon's eyes were fixed.

A man in a white suit and sun-hat, tanned, broad-shouldered, distinguished, one sleeve tucked into the side-pocket of his coat. The woman also in white, an amused smile parting her lips over strong teeth, a riding-crop across her knees, a dog at her feet.



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Grouped about these two, a Swiss manservant, a couple of Syrians, a Greek, and a Chinese cook.

Mrs. Hermon stared at the picture a moment, and then rattled the leaves back to the title-page of the book.

### A PILGRIMAGE IN SYRIA.

SYBIL AND THOMAS SWAINE.

Had Mrs. Hermon been an irresponsible and exclamatory male, she would probably have emphasised the discovery with a "Well, I'm damned!"

That book in the blue binding, with the gold lettering and the gold scroll-work, made a most pious pilgrimage through all the establishments of Ravenshoe. Here was an extraordinary piecing together of certain eccentric happenings that had puzzled the neighbourhood some three years ago. The més-alliance had betrayed itself between the covers of a book. And Mrs. Hermon remembered that she had been "surprised and pained."

"I can well understand that the girl made it a hole-and-corner business," she remarked to John Pinkney's sister; "I can never comprehend how a woman can marry beneath her. It is always a confession of a lack of proper self-respect. I suppose such people betray a natural coarseness and inferiority of fibre. Unfortunately, such alliances so often end in alcoholism and humiliation."

And yet Mr. Hermon had licked labels as a boy, before an assertive ingenuity had propelled him upwards towards gentility and Mrs. Hermon's arms.

Yet in Syria, amid black tents and solitary palms, the elemental mystery of life seemed to have lost none of its strange and indefinable beauty. Perhaps in the city of Damascus men still dream dreams. And the roses of Persia still bloom as in Omar's day.

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The one sympathetic mortal was a little round-backed lawyer, sitting in his office chair, and sweeping back a white forelock as he wrote his letters, or talked to the clients who came to him as to an oracle.

The buying of a christening present may have elements of pathos and of humour for a bachelor. It is said that a case of silver spoons and an enamelled porridge-bowl were dispatched to some city lost to the world amid the Isles of Greece.

Yet in England there is a cottage by the southern sea. And should Mrs. Portia Hermon ever travel in those parts, she may discover that even those "undisciplined mésalliances" do not always "end in drink."



